The Long Way Home

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The Long Way Home

by itsnatalie

Summary

With Jason tentatively back in the Batfamily, things are going pretty well for him--except for the whole thing with Tim. But who gives a shit about Tim Drake?

But when Jason and Tim are pulled into a frightening race for their lives inside a labyrinth that's out to kill them, they may have to look past their differences just to stay alive. Maybe along the way, they'll discover they aren't as different as they thought, and family comes in many different forms.

Chapter 1

Markos slipped through the glittering crowds of people and idly brushed a single drop of condensation off his sweating wine glass. He was not interested in talking to anyone—not enigmatic politicians, not the chortling business owners, not the chattering socialites. He held his face in just such a way that nobody tried to engage him, but nobody looked at him twice.

Markos was very good at being forgettable.

He was currently inside the Gotham City Metropolitan Museum of Art. He had an earpiece curling out of his collar where Rhea was talking to him as he walked. She was looking at what he was looking at, buried far between worlds in the dark, watching her mirror.

“No. No. Not them. No. Too boring. Too bland.”

Markos touched his ear. “You can’t dismiss them all,” he said to her. His quiet words were in a language that nobody had spoken for the past several hundred years. He faced the centerpiece of the gala: a monstrous, glittering Christmas tree that towered nearly thirty feet in the air, ribboned with scarlet garlands and shining golden baubles. “Nearly anyone here will do; most of them are worse than the criminals locked up in their prisons. I don’t understand why you are being so fastidious.”

On the other end of the line, he heard Rhea’s smile. “You are never fastidious when you choose. There is never any entertainment with you. I like to be entertained.”

“And I,” said Markos, his tone cool, “like to be out here, where the sun is.”

Seven years, all but gone. It never got easier. He never took long to pick a replacement when their positions were reversed—all he needed was a little evidence that someone deserved a long and frightening and painful death, and he was out and they were in. It was easy to find people like that in places like this, rampant with money and corruption and greed and malice.

Rhea dismissed this. “I have been out before, and I will be out again. I like to watch. You know this.”

Markos sighed. In all the long years they had known each other, he had seen her fascination with what she called the *human condition* time and time again.

What it really meant was that Rhea was fascinated with suffering.

“No,” she said, returning to her scan of the guests. “No.”

He sighed. “I am not staying here for very much longer, and you need my help to do this,” he reminded her.

“And I will choose,” she said, unruffled. Markos sipped at his wine and didn’t answer.

He glanced at the mirror on the far wall, fixed between several art installations, ornate and large in its frame. Instead of his own modest, dark-haired figure, he saw Rhea reflected back at him where he should have been, her shining white hair rippling along her shoulders.

She waved to him, winking, and then he was staring at his own reflection, lonesome and remote amongst the glittering party.

“Be careful,” he murmured reproachfully, turning away from the mirror. “Do you want to take someone accidentally?”

“Oh, because you have never done that.” She was still amused. “Just saying hello to you, my love. Keep going.”

Markos sighed, and kept walking. He was bitter and snappish because his time in the human world was coming to an end. While he was in the mortal world, he basked in the world, in the grass, in the trees. The dark was always waiting for him. He wanted to enjoy the light while it lasted. He did not want to help Rhea find a replacement. He wanted to be out there, feeling the wind whipping at his hair with the windows of a fast car down and eating quail eggs and admiring funny hats and enjoying his freedom while he had it.

“Stop,” Rhea said.

Markos did.

“Where?” he said.

“The two by the banquet table,” said Rhea, voice at once certain. “The left.”

Markos looked.

They were not brothers, not biologically anyway, but they had clearly been cut from the same cloth. Markos had come to Gotham City too many times for his own replacements not to know who they were.

“Those,” he said, “are bats.”

He said it with a pointed capitalization: *Bats*.

It was a piece of information that many would have gladly killed to have, but Markos cared little for it. He cared little for any mortal affairs. With their mirrors, they could see everything. Every corner of the world was available for their eyes, every secret in every human heart. It had astonished him, in early days. Now he knew nothing was substitute enough for being out in the world living in it.

“I do not care what they are,” said Rhea. “I want the one on the left.”

The right was older, and just slightly shorter: Richard Grayson. *Nightwing* . Markos observed Richard Grayson as he himself observed the partygoers. It was a keen, clever interest, his blue eyes cataloguing everything with a discerning and canny gaze. He was speaking with a small smile around his mouth to the young man on his left.

Rhea’s choice had eyes as blue as his adopted brother’s, but his gaze was ferocious, disdainful. Where Dick Grayson was graceful and lithe, his companion was broad, coiled—the lines of his face colder, the mouth more sarcastic. A streak of white blasted through his dark hair, and barely subdued danger radiated off him as completely as if he had been covered in weapons instead of sheathed in a pitch-black suit.

Jason Todd. Red Hood.

Markos felt a flash of—something. Not pity. He and Rhea had stopped pitying their replacements long ago. It was either him, or them, and years and years and years of the dark had taught him to choose himself, no matter what.

Nevertheless, he found himself saying, somewhat to his own surprise, “He came back from the dead only several years ago. You are going to drag him back?”

He stopped, wondering what had possessed him to say that. Rhea laughed gently at him, and a large part of himself agreed with her. “Polyagapiménos. What is this? Trying to make me choose, and then

trying to make me change my mind? What is that boy to you, hm?"

"No," Markos said at once, feeling slightly foolish. "Nothing. But it does seem . . . like something you would want to take into consideration."

"He is also a criminal," she reminded him, a smile still in her voice. "He has committed atrocities, even against his own family. He fits the criteria. We don't pick innocents anymore, mm? And he is certainly not an innocent."

He wasn't. Markos began to move toward the two young men. "Yes, and I don't care," he said, mostly to himself.

He heard her voice change as she settled her jaw on her palm. "And nobody can cheat death forever, Markos," she said. "Not without a price, as you and I well know."

"Is this his price?" Markos tipped his head, wondering to himself how he was going to get Jason Todd in front of a mirror.

Rhea's voice shrugged. "His price. My freedom. The scales always balance."

"It will be nice," Markos found himself saying, "to be out together again, at the same time."

That could only ever happen for seven days at a time every seven years, when Rhea had just barely chosen a replacement and Markos' replacement was still alive, or vice versa. Then, inevitably, an old replacement would die and one of them would have to go back into the dark, into the Labyrinth.

The scales always balanced.

"Mmm," she said. "I look forward to it, my love."

He set his eyes on Jason Todd. "I was thinking Amsterdam," he said. "This time. I think it will be nice this time of year."

"Then to Amsterdam," agreed Rhea, "we shall go."

* * *

"I am not," said Jason, for the third time, "going to help you paint your apartment."

“Jay,” said Dick, earnest gaze entreating. “Please? Damian has school —”

“Not that he *needs it,”* muttered Jason.

“—and Tim’s plate is full this week. It’ll be *two* days at most—”

“Replacement’s plate is *not* full. He’s fucking nineteen,” said Jason waspishly. “Get him to—I’m *sorry. Drake’s* plate is not—Dick. Oh my God. *Timothy.* Can you chill. He’s not even here. Isn’t B trying to get him to do things more *age-appropriate* , these days? Not patrolling? He’s got plenty of fucking time.”

Dick gave him one last Dick look before saying, “No. Tim’s the one who helped me move, and he really *is* busy. It’s your turn to help me.”

“In which you are upgrading from one terrible shitty apartment to a slightly less shitty apartment.”

Dick rolled his eyes to the heavens. “Says the guy who lives in safe houses that have about seventeen health code violations each—”

“I’m not painting. I am *helping out* elsewhere.”

Dick gave him another look, but didn’t say anything. Jason had been trying to turn over a new leaf, as they say (as Bruce said) and his particular brand of retribution was now more controlled and pointed, but his influence in the gangs of Gotham was as strong as it ever was. And Jason liked it that way.

“Booked and busy,” said Jason, shrugging elegantly to diffuse the tension. Jason was roundly fond of his older brother, even if he’d never admit to it, and their amicability was something that Jason was keen to keep. “I’m a very popular person, Dick. Why isn’t Wally helping you paint, hm? He’s around a lot. *And* he’s a speedster. And don’t think I don’t know you don’t have other friends. I know Babs picked that couch, because you certainly didn’t. You have no taste.”

The tips of Dick’s ears reddened, but his scowl was normal and Dick Grayson-ish instead of the more intimidating disapproval of Nightwing. “I do too have taste. I helped pick out that couch.”

“Cute. Charming. Still the same question, big brother: why am *I* being prevailed upon to help you paint some walls, then?”

“Who is painting walls,” said another voice, rigid and overly

enunciated, stiffly formal even if he was addressing two of his family members.

“Hey, kiddo,” said Dick, one of his genuine, sparkling smiles lighting up his face at once. “I didn’t know you were here.”

Damian parked himself between Jason and Dick and surveyed the room with a distaste that was impressively potent, even for a thirteen-year-old—the age of Perpetual Disdain. “Father and I arrived ten minutes ago. He is attempting to create permanent Christmas traditions. I don’t approve of this one, but he says he needs to keep up his public persona.”

“The Christmas tree is up at the Manor,” Dick informed Jason.

“Yes.” Damian twisted around and stared up at Jason accusingly. “Why were you not there? You were expressly invited.”

It was crazy how a thirteen-year-old could make Jason feel *squirmy*. “I was . . . busy,” he said, trying to keep a note of defensiveness out of his voice. And he had been. On purpose.

He couldn’t say what he was really thinking: that he couldn’t stand Christmas.

It still took some time, parsing through the memories that had started filtering back over the past two years. Though he and Bruce had had several progressive conversations, they were still tense and unsure around each other (and in Jason’s case, angry—always angry) and Christmas made everything paradoxical and terrible. He wanted to be at the Manor. He’d rather be anywhere *but* the Manor. He wanted to tell Bruce sorry, he wanted Bruce to tell *him* sorry, he wanted to scream at Bruce, he wanted to hug Bruce. Their hard-won and tentative truce still left a bad taste in Jason’s mouth. Bruce’s words were always clanging around in his head: *you can always come home, when you’re ready.*

Fuck him.

“I’ll come by and see it,” Jason tried to placate Damian instead. “I’ll even bring an ornament for it. Just keep your dog from eating me.”

This mollified Damian somewhat, though his haughty expression barely shifted. It was strange, knowing that Jason was actually coming to know the little beast well enough to understand him. “He will not eat you. His appearance is more intimidating than his personality.

Don't bring any weapons."

Jason had not been caught without weapons since he had died, and he certainly was not about to start, fondness for thirteen-year-olds be damned. "Deal. The dog will not see any weapons."

Damian flashed him a look.

"What?" Jason said.

Damian's mouth made a shape of displeasure before he said, looking straight ahead, "You said you would take me sledding." His voice was prim and stiff, which was how Jason knew he was embarrassed.

Jason's triumph was hot and immediate. He had to smother his grin instantly, because that would have made Damian snap at him. He exchanged meaningful eye contact with Dick— *look, Dick, I* am *making this work*—

Dick just smiled at him, warm and proud, and Jason did not feel any way about it. None at all.

"Yeah, little buddy," said Jason. "I'll come by this week, see the tree, and take you sledding. I am not responsible for sprains, bruises, or broken bones. I can only guarantee a great fucking time."

"Jay," complained Dick.

"Do not call me 'little buddy,'" muttered Damian. "And I will not break any bones, Richard."

"Who's breaking bones?"

The moment popped like a soap bubble. Jason felt his features harden instantly, and tried to unwind them so they looked 'regular human' instead of 'statue that is annoyed and uncomfortable.'

"No one, Timothy. That is the point. Where is Father?"

"Trapped by Councilman Pugface." Tim tipped his head and cracked his neck, absently slipping between Dick and Damian. "I wasn't sticking around to listen to that bullshit. He's on his own there."

Jason knew instantly who Tim was talking about. The fact that Tim called Councilman Shaw 'Councilman Pugface' was actually very funny, but Jason was not going to laugh. They were not at the 'I laugh at your jokes' stage. They were perennially at the 'I tolerate your

presence, mostly' stage, which was a huge improvement from the previous 'I may or may not beat the shit out of you on sight' stage.

Dick often said, "Can you please just *talk* to him like a normal person. Just one single normal conversation. Talk about the goddamn weather for all I care."

And Jason often said, "No."

So that was where they were at.

"He's really just trying to get B to bribe him. It's not gonna work, but he's yet to figure out that Bruce actually cares about putting his money where his mouth is. Hello, Jason," Tim added, rigidly. He didn't look at Jason when he said it.

Jason said, "Hello, Tim," and gave himself five stars for civility.

Dick looked unhappily between Tim and Jason. Out of the corner of his eye, Jason saw Tim give Dick an expressively annoyed look.

See, *he hates me too, Dick, can't you just let us dislike each other in peace?*

"Jason is coming to the Manor to see the tree this week," Damian informed Tim, a note of *something* in his voice that made Jason want to grind his teeth together.

Note to self , he thought thinly, *do not get attached to small teenagers. They will make you try to get along with everyone they like, including Timothy Drake.*

"It's bigger than last year's, which should logically be impossible." Tim was smiling, but the smile was for Damian. Jason made a show of zoning out of the conversation, looking around the room, bored.

A new, broad voice entered the conversation, deep with amusement. "Don't mention that. Alfred told me next year's needs to be smaller, or he's canceling Christmas."

Jason's teeth were hurting. He needed to clench something other than his jaw, so he folded his arms and fisted his hands together.

He only felt like a ticking time bomb when Bruce Wayne was around.

"How'd you get away from Pugface?" asked Tim.

“Tim,” said Bruce, in his Dad voice. “He might hear you.”

“Oh, sorry. I’ll say it a little louder. HOW DID YOU—”

Dick elbowed Tim, which Tim dodged neatly.

“Slow poke,” Tim told him. “Can’t believe you hit your peak at twenty-five.”

“Stop it. You’re going to step on my *shoes,”* said Damian.

This was all getting too chummy. “I’ll see you around,” Jason announced, mostly to Dick. “Places to be, people to annoy. Booked and busy.” He’d already made that joke. That annoyed him more, mostly because Dick had been around to hear it both times.

The Waynes all looked at him.

Do not, Jason told himself, *punch Bruce. It would upset Damian, and it would upset Dick.*

“Well, Jason,” said Bruce, with a faint, strained smile after an impossibly long pause, “it was good to see you. Don’t be a stranger.”

Tim made a coughing noise.

Do not punch Tim, either, for reasons stated above.

“He is coming to see the tree this week,” Damian piped up, looking up at Bruce.

God dammit.

“Oh, good,” said Bruce, very nearly succeeding at sounding offhand. “And, I’m not sure what your plans are for Christmas, but—”

Oh, no. Absolutely not. No, no. “Really gotta take this. See ya, wouldn’t want to be ya, etc. Bye.”

He strolled away, purposefully adding a cool swagger to his walk.

No way. He was not a (excessively violent) criminal anymore, and he and the Drake-Al Ghul-Grayson-Waynes were not trying to beat each other up anymore, and that was that. Nobody was getting an inch more.

He strode further away, keen to put as much distance between them

as possible, when he saw something out of the corner of his eye.

It was a man, small and thin and pasty, and he looked very familiar.

He *was* familiar.

Jason said, “Hey.”

The man looked up and saw Jason.

“Fuck,” said Jason, “me.”

The man turned and darted back through the crowd, as quick as a rat.

Jason weighed his pros and cons. To tell the other bats, or to not tell the other bats.

He didn’t have to weigh his pros and cons for long, because the decision was made for him. The huge Christmas tree in the middle of the room blew up.

* * *

“Tim? *Damian?”* Dick’s voice was faint in the pandemonium that had erupted. Tim still heard it. Dick and Bruce had left Damian and Tim to go be social and Wayne-ish, and that of course was when a *bomb* had gone off.

Couldn’t criminals take Christmas vacations?

“Get off me, Drake,” snapped Damian. He only used Tim’s surname when he had been startled, badly. When Tim didn’t answer right away, Damian’s voice went reedy and thin. “ *Tim?”*

Tim uncoiled his body from around Damian’s just enough that Tim wasn’t suffocating him. “Hey, I’m good. I’m good,” he said into Damian’s ear. His eyes darted around the masses of running, screaming people. “Stay down, okay? There might be another one.”

“We have to—”

From further down the gala, another ear-splitting explosion cracked through the air. Smoke billowed, black and noxious. Christmas tree ornaments shriveled and melted as flames grew big, then bigger. Ash drifted through the air. Fire began to lick at the walls, and flaming branches buckled to the floor as people ran in all directions, frightened animals driven into a frenzy.

Someone grabbed Tim's shoulder.

Tim reacted on instinct, but before his neat, lethal jab met flesh, it was cleanly blocked.

"Tim," said Bruce, urgently. Dick stood over his shoulder, body tense, eyes scanning the crowd.

"Are either of you hurt?"

Damian wriggled out from underneath Tim and jumped to his feet. "I am unharmed. What is our plan?"

Bruce brushed ash off Tim's shoulders and pulled him to his feet. Putting one of his hands on each of their shoulders, he said, voice low and quick and in control, "You two grab everyone you can and get them out. Dick and I will help—then we need to get surveillance on this, try to see who did it. Dick—"

"Firefighters are on their way," said Dick immediately. "Babs is getting footage from the surveillance cameras."

"Get out before the smoke starts getting worse," said Bruce to Damian and Tim. "Don't come back in here once you're out."

"Father—" started Damian, a complaining note in his voice.

"Not when the building is on fire, Damian," said Bruce firmly. "Go to where the second bomb went off, see who you can get out."

They understood the next part of the plan without being told: after evacuation and emergency services were called, they would suit up, and begin the hunt.

Tim grabbed Damian's wrist so they wouldn't get separated, and they ran.

"Be careful!" were Dick's parting words.

The smoke filled the room, creeping down towards their heads in a black fog. Tim could feel it start to irritate his lungs. It had become oppressively hot.

They began to herd people out, pushing them towards the doors. There were few other calm people amidst the disarray, but between those few people, everyone flooded the exits.

Tim helped a woman with a burned leg out into the night, her dress torn and singed, keeping Damian in the corner of his eye. Together they exited the great front doors. The immediate rush of cold air soothed his overheated skin.

Police sirens wailed through the night. Tim coughed, harsh and barking, his eyes watering. He handed the woman over to what few medical services were already on the scene and grabbed Damian to pull him away from the crushes of people.

Brushing ash out of Damian's black hair, he said, "You good?"

Damian looked at him. "Timothy," he said, voice rigid and halting, the way it was when he was about to ask something he felt that he shouldn't, "do you think that Jason—"

"Jason's a big kid, Dames," said Tim, mustering a quick smile. "He walked away from the tree, not towards it."

Tim tried not to think about the fact that Jason might have set off the bomb himself. He wasn't doing that stuff anymore, and he liked Damian and Dick.

Probably.

Damian's mouth curled with dissatisfaction.

"Okay, all right, fine," said Tim, sighing. "You go that way, and I'll go this way. I'll comm you if I find him, you comm me if you find him. Don't go back in there, promise?"

"Tt," said Damian, rolling his eyes.

Tim took that for acquiescence and headed off to the right, undoing his tie.

"Probably already vanished into the night," muttered Tim, yanking it off. "'Red Hood at gala; gala goes up in flames, literally.' And who could *possibly* have done that—"

It wasn't that Tim didn't trust that Jason would do what he'd told Bruce he'd do—

All right. It was exactly that.

He'd been in a coma for three days after Jason's little attack on him in Titan Tower. Swallowing and breathing had hurt like a bitch for

weeks afterward. And *yet* everybody was still eager to let Jason right back into the fold. Never mind that Jason had nearly murdered Tim, never mind all his other crimes . . . Bruce wanted his wittle boy back, even if he was a criminal, an arsonist, definitely a murderer, one hundred percent a giant *asshole*—

And now Damian was on the Jason train, too. Just when he and Damian had finally started to feel like brothers, like proper real *brothers,* Damian wanted to be hanging out with *Jason.*

He strode around the side of the building, the noise level lessening with every step he took. Smoke surged into the air high above. The world smelled like fire.

Fifty feet away, a bearded man turned to watch Tim approach, eyes glinting in the shadows.

Tim automatically slowed, hackles raising. There was nothing overly intimidating about him at all—he wore a clean, expensive suit, and he was not built like a fighter—but there was something ominous and overly still about the way he watched Tim through dark, cool eyes that made something inside of him go cold.

Before Tim could begin to work out why he, a master martial artist, felt like a prey animal in front of this slight, nondescript man, the man turned around, opened a side door, and slipped into the building.

"Hey!" snapped a voice, startling Tim. "Man, you can't go in there—holy shitballs. Why are people so—*hey*!"

Jason melted from the shadows in his pitch black suit, looking supremely annoyed. He hadn't noticed Tim.

Muttering darkly to himself, Jason followed the man in, slamming the door in annoyance.

Pressing his comm, Tim said, "Damian. Jason's fine."

Bruce's voice responded. "Tim. Where are you?"

"Coming back," said Tim.

Tim turned around. Then he glanced back at the door, then at the smoke, and then back at the door, which did not magically open to reveal Jason when Tim mentally asked it to.

“Ugh,” he muttered, rubbing at his still-stinging eyes. “ *Screw* you.”

Tim was just going in to make sure Jason hadn’t gone back to the main area, and that he wasn’t actively on fire. That was it. That was all.

It was dark when he went through the door. Shapes of cleaning carts and mops and brooms loomed up out of the shadows. He banged his hip against an unseen counter.

He wished he knew why he felt so unsettled. Why had that man’s eyes been so *creepy?*

Tim pushed open a swinging door and came out into a hallway in the museum. Portraits stared accusingly at him as he ran silently down a line of them. The faint smell of smoke drifted through the air, and curls of it were already sneaking along the ceiling.

The smoke thickened as he came closer to the main hall. Tim slowed, coughing slightly.

He was about to turn back—Jason was an adult, he could make his own damn choices, and maybe he and that man were *colleagues* , anyway—when he spotted Jason, facing towards the actively-on-fire hall. The long mirror on the wall next to them was cracked and broken, fractured reflections of Jason and Tim parallel to each other.

“Jason!” he hissed, taking care to stay far enough back that Jason couldn’t attack him immediately.

Jason whirled around.

His features instantly tightened into a poisonous scowl, the way they always did when Tim appeared. “Drake. What in the fuck are you *doing*? Are you trying to *die?”*

“I could ask you the same question,” Tim snapped, annoyed at himself. “Why are you running into burning buildings?”

Jason’s left eyebrow crawled up, and he very pointedly looked Tim up and down, eloquently reminding Tim that he was an enormous hypocrite.

“Cool,” said Tim. “Bye.”

He turned to go.

The bearded man was standing right behind him, eyes unblinking and blank.

Tim reeled away immediately, every muscle in his body tensed for an attack.

It didn't come. The man simply stared at them, hands behind his back, cool as you please.

"Hey," said Jason, and Tim started again; Jason was much closer to Tim than he'd been a second ago. Jason's blue eyes were fixed on the man, and they were narrowed and calculating, mouth angry. "What the fuck are you doing? Building's on fire, in case you missed that."

The man looked at Tim.

"Don't look," said the man to him, voice strange and accented in a way that Tim had never heard before.

"What?" said Tim.

"Don't talk to him," said Jason. "Are you in with Odessa? What the fuck do you guys want?"

The man let his gaze slowly crawl to Jason. "I am with no one." He looked back at Tim. With a strange sense of urgency, he said again, "Don't look."

Then he slid his stare to the cracked mirror on the wall.

Both Jason and Tim looked instinctively at it.

None of their reflections were in the mirror. Instead, staring back at them from ten separate shards through ten separate pairs of hard, piercing eyes, a woman with ghostly white hair stared back at them, thin mouth curled with amusement.

Tim looked at one pair of fractured eyes, and Jason looked at another.

The mirror warped, becoming deep and bottomless. Tim tried to shout, to look away, but the woman's gray eyes pinned him like an insect.

The mirror shattered, shards exploding outward, spraying the far wall. The glass did not hit Tim or Jason, because Tim and Jason were not there to be hit.

* * *

Markos stared straight ahead. He was alone in the hallway.

On the floor, amongst the glass, both of the boys' phones lit up, woken by the sudden movement. Two small comms blipped, side by side. Two or three other gadgets, slender and black, lay abandoned and haphazard.

The Labyrinth did not like technology, so none of it had passed through with the two boys.

The *two* boys.

"Rhea," he said, voice slightly hoarse.

"Markos," she answered at once, voice wondering.

"Did they both—"

"Yes," she said, breathless. "Oh, they did. Both of them. I can feel them—there are *two* here."

Markos could only ask, "How?"

"One looked at my left eye, one at my right," said Rhea. "I felt it. The same time. The exact same time. In all our years…"

"The other one," said Markos. "The second . . . the boy. Rhea, he was —we said, after the last, we *said* that . . . he is an innocent, he did not —"

"A gift from the gods, my love," said Rhea. She was exuberant. "What are the odds! We have witnessed a miracle, a wondrous—"

"He did not deserve—" Markos stopped himself. He was nearly shouting. He was, he discovered on the other side of a moment, upset. Very upset.

"Ah, my love, my life," she said, voice instantly soothing. That made it worse; he did not need to be patronized. "What are we to do about it now? The game has begun. The Labyrinth is preparing for our race."

"But you could—" he stopped.

"I could what, hm?" Now the tone was brittle, sharp. "I could what. *Let* them win? Let them beat me, so I spend another seven years here

in this dark? Surely you would not suggest that. Surely not after all these years."

He was quiet for a minute. He knew she would win. They always did. The rules of the Labyrinth had been set up to try and make it fair, but it wasn't. Markos and Rhea had spent eons walking the halls of the Labyrinth. The horrors were old to them; the tricks were known. It was simply a matter of getting to the right hole in the wall.

The Labyrinth was ancient, and calculating, and malicious.

Replacements never stood a chance.

She murmured his name again, gentle once more. "Did you think of what this means? This means we can be together for seven whole years. With two of them in here, we can be out there, in the sun. Seven years. They stay in the dark, and we can be together. Isn't that what you want?"

Seven more years in the light. He only had days left, and he could have seven more years.

All it would take, he thought bitterly, was two young men's lives.

"Then I suppose," he said, wearily, "I will see you at the finish line."

* * *

When Jason woke up, the first thing he was aware of was that he wasn't restrained, which was odd, because usually when he didn't remember blacking out, he woke up with some sort of rope-handcuffs-what-have-you. The second thing he was aware of was that he was deeply, deeply irritated.

He was sitting in an overstuffed armchair the color of congealed blood, slumped to the side in a way that made him wince as he lifted his neck, stretching.

"The fuck," he muttered, half-lifting himself out of his chair to look around.

It was one of those weird, overly opulent rooms that dramatic rich people with no taste lived in. Dark, shadowed paintings covered the walls. The rugs were thick and wine-red, and all of the furniture cushions were red too. Firelight flickered on dark wood walls. Candles wavered lazily. There were no windows.

On a short sofa next to him, sprawled in a forgotten sort of way, Tim Drake was asleep or unconscious or dead, face pale under his dark hair, eyes closed.

Probably not dead. Jason kicked at a foot that was hanging off the sofa.

Tim twitched. Not dead. Good, because Bruce probably would have blamed Jason, and Jason did not need that just at the moment.

Jason stood up, slowly looking around.

There was no one there. Nothing made a sound. It was enough to make the hair on his neck stand on end.

Two doors stood closed on one wall, less than four feet apart.

This was beginning to feel Fucked Up with a capital f, and that made Jason angry, because the person who did Fucked Up with a capital f was that dumb, stupid clown.

But why hadn't he been tied up? Why wasn't Tim tied up? Why was he still—

Wait.

His hands flew to his waist, to his suit coat pockets.

It was fine. He *was* still armed. He had his five knives and his taser and the small, slim black handgun the size of a wallet.

So what the *fuck* was going on?

He went to the doors.

They didn't have doorknobs. That would have been too easy.

Jason ignored how that made him feel and began eyeing the walls. He wasn't desperate enough to try ramming his body into the doors just yet. They looked pretty solid.

He remembered going into a burning building after a man, so perhaps this served him and his good impulses right. He remembered arguing with Tim, and Tim being a fucking nuisance per the norm. He remembered—

That was where his memory felt fractured, wrong. There were no

memories after—a *mirror—?*

Jason was feeling along the walls when Tim woke up.

“What the *hell.”*

“Rise and shine, Timboy,” said Jason, without looking over at him. “Welcome to the world of the living.”

“And where exactly,” said Tim, “is that?”

Jason turned around, facing Tim. His annoyance had increased significantly since waking up. “Yeah. Because I for sure know that. And that’s why I’m fucking trying to find a way out.*”*

Tim’s eyes analyzed him keenly, searching for the lie. When they didn’t find one, he moved on to the room they were in.

“You tried the doors.”

Jason’s irritation spiked. “They don’t have fucking *doorknobs,* Sherlock Holmes.”

Tim stood up, gaze flicking briefly to the doorknob-less doors. He felt at his ear, then his pocket.

“Do you have your phone?” he asked Jason.

Jason hadn’t thought to check for that, but he did now.

“No,” he said.

“Any way to communicate with anyone?” Tim’s voice was brisk, solemn.

Interesting that Tim’s first thought had been communication with the outside world. That wasn’t even in the top ten things that Jason considered doing when faced with any kind of trouble. “Nope. Comm’s gone.”

“You cannot communicate with anyone here. The Labyrinth does not allow it.”

Tim started. Jason whirled around.

In a chair that definitely had not been occupied a literal second ago, there was an eerily tall, thin woman regarding them with amused gray

eyes. She had long white hair despite being maybe mid-thirties, and she looked faintly familiar.

“You,” said Tim. “You were the one in the mirror.”

Now that Jason thought about it, there *had* been a woman in the mirror.

He considered this. Then he pulled out his handgun and pointed it at her. “You wanna consider letting us out now?”

She did not pull out her own weapon, which was usually what happened in these situations. Nor did she seem particularly troubled by the gun.

“I cannot let you out,” she said, spreading her hands. Her voice was strangely accented, words carefully enunciated. “The Labyrinth will let us out when it is ready for us.”

“Great,” said Jason. He did not put the gun down. “A crazy one. Why do I always fucking get the crazy ones?”

From behind him, Tim said, “What do you mean, the *Labyrinth?”*

The woman smiled gently at him. Firelight flickered over her milky white skin, her long white dress. “It is where we are, young one. The Labyrinth.”

The way she said it sent something crawling down Jason’s spine.

“You’re going to have to elaborate on that,” he said.

“Sit,” the woman invited them, gesturing to the armchairs.

Neither of them sat.

She shrugged. “Suit yourselves. This is better, perhaps. You are warriors. You might even have a fighting chance.”

“Warriors,” muttered Jason scathingly. “Like we’re in the fucking—whatever century. Explain, lady, or I *will* put a bullet in you.”

She stared up at him with her unfathomable gray eyes, a small, perennial smile on her thin mouth.

Jason didn’t care for it at all.

She folded her hands together. “I pulled you into this place,” she said. “Through the mirror.”

“Oh my God,” said Jason.

“Would you shut up?” Tim said to him.

Jason looked at Tim. “I am very pissed off,” he informed Tim. “I am holding a gun. Now is not the fucking time.”

“Let her *finish,”* said Tim coldly.

Jason made a noise of disdain through his nose and pointed at Tim in a threatening sort of way. He moved the threatening finger to the woman.

She was still smiling, which did nothing for Jason’s mood.

“You are very impatient for your second death, Jason Todd,” she said to him.

Tim inhaled sharply.

Jason did not pull the trigger. But it was close.

“You’re also going to tell me,” said Jason, “how you know who I am.”

“I know most things that go on in your world,” she said calmly. “I watch. I have nothing better to do in here, after the race is over.”

This time, Jason didn’t say anything when she paused.

She said again, “This place is called the Labyrinth. When the Labyrinth is ready, you will choose a door to go through. I’ll go through the other door. Whoever makes it to the end first will get to leave.” She shrugged elegantly. “As simple and complicated as that, gentlemen.”

“So when you said *labyrinth,”* said Tim, “you meant like an *actual* labyrinth.”

She smiled gently at him. “It is, and it is not. This Labyrinth is different. It will try to stop you from winning, and it will try to stop me from winning. I will be frank, my friends. I will probably beat you. I take no pleasure in it.”

Jason sneered. “And what makes you so sure of *that?”*

Her gray eyes bored into him. “I have solved this Labyrinth hundreds of times, Jason Todd. I have played this game hundreds of times. I only lost once: my first time through, many, many years ago. There have been an enormous amount of times since then, and I have not come in second since.”

“And what happens,” said Tim, “if we lose?”

She regarded him coolly. “You will stay in this Labyrinth, Timothy Drake. No human has ever survived it. The short of it is that you will die.”

“And if I kill you right now,” said Jason, “what happens then?”

Her placid smile grew. Standing up, she placed herself directly in front of his gun, then reached up and put her thumb gently against his trigger finger.

“Go on, then,” she said. “See what happens. You cannot hurt me, and I cannot hurt you, until the race starts. Pull the trigger. See what happens,” she repeated.

Jason, contrary to popular opinion, did not like to shoot people. He did not move.

With a strong, abrupt movement, she forced his trigger finger back. The gun went off, sharp and horrible in the enclosed room.

Tim shot to his feet with a wordless sound of surprise.

He needn’t have worried. Jason’s gun had done nothing at all.

Jason stared at her, then tugged the gun away from her and took three steps back. She let him. She was still smiling. There wasn’t a mark on her dress.

“Was that . . . loaded?” asked Tim, sounding uncertain for the first time.

Without answering, Jason shot the painting next to him, the report echoing eerily. The bullet tore into it, leaving a marked, smoking hole.

There was the very specific silence that happens when two mostly regular people are facing off with something they have just realized is not human.

The woman said, “My name is Rhea, and I am your opponent. I say again, Jason Todd and Timothy Drake: welcome to the Labyrinth.”

* * *

There was nothing to do after that but wait.

Jason kept pacing like a caged animal, restless in the supercilious, unpredictable way that a caged tiger was. This kept distracting Tim, which bothered him enormously. He was trying to think of a logical way out of this. He was trying to figure out how he was going to work with what he had: three weapons, no communicators, no cell phones, no noticeable technology of any kind, and Jason Todd.

And also the information that if they lost the game they were about to play, they were going to die.

Tim was beginning to notice the lack of windows a lot more now. He wished somebody would put the fire in the fireplace out.

He needed more information, and as much as he disliked talking to crazy people, he only had one source at the moment.

“You said it would try to stop us,” said Tim, watching the log in the fireplace crack in half with a shower of sparks. “This . . . Labyrinth. What does that mean?”

The whatever-she-was—Rhea—regarded him with her immeasurable eyes, hands folded gracefully, looking like a regal statue. Tim briefly wondered if she was capable of blinking.

“The Labyrinth is sentient,” she informed him without preamble.

Jason gave a pointedly derisive *ha!*

Rhea did not seem bothered by Jason’s haughty scorn, but Tim had to remind himself every ten seconds that if he punched Jason, the situation would go from bad to worse, because then it would not only be Tim-had-to-deal-with-Jason-Todd, it would be Tim-had-to-deal-with- *angry*-Jason-Todd.

Rhea continued, unruffled. “It does not take sides. It will be as difficult on me as it is on you. And it will read your mind, Timothy Drake. It will bring to life your worst nightmares, your most frightening ghosts. Your past will return within these walls, and there is only one way out.”

Tim could think of a lot of things from his past that he would prefer never to think about again. From the way Jason paused, Tim reckoned that Jason probably felt the same way.

"And you wouldn't particularly be interested," said Jason, who, to his credit, had not lost a single ounce of his disparaging sarcasm, "in telling us how to find that one way out."

Rhea shrugged elegantly. "It changes. The doorway moves. If I told you to immediately go left upon exiting this room, the Labyrinth would create a river in which the only way to go was straight forward. If I said avoid all right turns, the Labyrinth would be made of only right turns. The only advice I have for you is this: sleep when you can. Eat when it offers you food. Neither of those things will happen very often."

"Oh, yeah," said Jason. "Eat the weird, probably poisoned food that will just magically appear."

Rhea smiled. "Multiple of your predecessors have been afraid of precisely the same thing. Starvation is a boring way to die here, but if that is what you choose, no one will stop you. The food, however, is not poisoned. The Labyrinth is more creative than that."

Tim watched her for a second. "Is this place . . . a living organism? Are we being digested by some huge alien-thing that only lets us out if we win?"

Jason's sound this time had a lot more disgust in it.

Rhea looked pleased with Tim, which did not make Tim feel better. "That is an interesting way to put it. You are very clever, Mr. Drake. It is not alive in the way that you think of things as alive, but digestion . . . an apt way to put it."

It was a time that Tim could have done without being agreed with. He did not care for the idea that he was being *digested* at all.

Tim's eyebrows scrunched as he thought aloud. "So we're in some sort of . . . other dimension, and the center of this weird-ass place will let us back into our dimension. The door, or whatever. Okay."

He could work with that. These were not ideal circumstances, but he could work with that.

"*Okay,* he says," said Jason, with measured contempt. "Like he gets

stuck in other dimensional places *all the time."*

"What's the time, usually?" Tim asked Rhea, ignoring Jason. She seemed willing to answer questions, which was weird, but helpful to him, if nothing else. "Like. How long do these races usually last?"

Rhea thought. "You are asking questions no one usually thinks to ask. It's interesting . . . the longest race I had was thirty of your days, though day and night do not exist here."

Well, Tim's circadian rhythm was already fucked, so that didn't particularly matter to him.

Jason was idly spinning his gun around. "And the shortest?" he asked.

Rhea's benign smile sent a chill down Tim's spine.

"Four minutes," she said serenely. "He jumped off the bridge the Labyrinth offered him."

Jason and Tim stared at her.

"You should know, though," she said, looking back and forth between the two of them, "that death will not free you from this place. The Labyrinth will still have you. It doesn't matter what form. The scales will always balance."

There was that specific silence again.

"This," said Jason, "sounds so fun."

The world rumbled. Candles flickered and went out with ghostly curls of smoke. It was as though some huge, unseen storm had rolled in, thunder snarling all around them.

The fire plunged until it was little more than glowing coals.

The world went silent.

There was a soft *snick,* and when Tim looked over, hyperaware of sound, he saw that the doors now had doorknobs.

Rhea's smile was haunting in the dim light. She gestured with her long-fingered hands.

"Visitors choose first," she said.

Tim and Jason exchanged a glance. Jason's face was unreadable.

"You choose," said Tim. If they immediately walked into some weird-ass monster fuckery, he didn't want Jason blaming him for it.

Jason glanced at the two doors. To Tim, there wasn't a point to waffling, because they were exactly the same in every way. There was no way to determine if one led to certain death and one led to rainbows and sunshine, so the choice wasn't a difficult one. Fifty-fifty, evenly.

Jason apparently felt the same way, because he didn't hesitate before walking to the right door and putting his hand on it.

"It's still fucking locked," he said, turning accusingly to Rhea.

She stood up and glided to the other door.

"The Labyrinth is nothing if not fair," she told him. "We go at the same time."

Tim walked over and stood behind Jason. Jason was not anybody he wanted to be around, but he was not whatever this crazy lady was, and at least Tim knew Jason wanted the same thing he did.

"Now," said Rhea smoothly.

Jason and Rhea both turned the doorknobs, and both doors opened.

Beyond, there was a tunnel made of bricks. They could go left, or right. Ghostly white light flickered. Visibility would be low.

Rhea smiled at them once more. "Game on, Jason Todd and Timothy Drake. May you be worthy opponents."

With that, she disappeared through her door.

This was all beginning to feel like it was very out of Tim's control. Tim hated it.

Rhea's door shut, and then it disappeared.

"Jesus," said Tim.

"Bye, bitch," muttered Jason. Holding his gun aloft, he stuck his head out of their door and looked left, then right.

“It looks like we’re in a sewer,” he reported to Tim, “but nothing terrible.” He stepped into the hallway beyond.

“Yet,” muttered Tim. He did not want to be in a damn jacket and tie. He wanted to be in his Red Robin suit. He wanted his staff.

He stepped in after Jason, feet splashing in the shallow water that coated the tunnel.

The door behind him slid smoothly shut. A second later, it too vanished, becoming seamless brick like the rest of the wall.

“Well,” said Jason, his blue eyes glinting in the semi-darkness. “Nothing to do but go, I guess.”

“Which way?” Tim said, looking back and forth. There was nothing but darkness in both directions, and the only sound was the shallow glugging and dripping of water.

“I picked the door, hotshot. You pick which way we go.”

“So we just . . . take turns?”

“Unless you know of a way out of here right now.”

They eyed each other, both suspicious, both knowing that they had no choice.

Tim said, warily, “If we’re going to do this—”

“Pick a direction, Sherlock,” interrupted Jason impatiently. “Apparently we’ve got anywhere from four minutes to a month to do all this chatting, so we might as well get going.”

Tim did not move. “If we’re going to do this,” he said, doing his best to inject some of Dick’s confidence and listen-to-me tone into his voice, “I need to know that I can trust you not to kill me.”

Jason stared at him. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

Tim said, “As it’s happened before, no, I am not, Todd.”

Jason rolled his eyes. “I told Batman it wouldn’t happen again.” There was definitive note of complaining in Jason’s voice, like a petulant child’s.

“Cool,” said Tim. “Tell *me.”*

“Holy fuck,” said Jason. “Fine. Though it is *very tempting,* like *right now,* Drake, I will not kill you on this wacko fucky journey that we are about to take.”

“Thank you,” said Tim. “Left.”

Left they went, reluctant allies.

The Labyrinth watched them go. The Labyrinth had never had two on the same path, so it would have to decide how to go about this in a way that it was not used to.

No matter. It was nothing if not excellent at adapting.

It was nothing if not excellent at preying on fear, and it turned out that there was a lot to be afraid of in Jason Todd and Timothy Drake’s heads.

Chapter 2

The police found their comms, and their phones. It took Commissioner Gordon two hours and multiple healthy bribes to return them to Batman, who did not explain anything, or ask any questions.

They left the gang bomber to the questionable competency of the police and began the search for Red Hood and Red Robin. No, that wasn't right. They were searching for Timothy Drake-Wayne and Jason Todd.

Bruce and Barbara went through the security footage, twice. There was a nearly imperceptible glitch at 9:37 pm in the back hallway by the back door. Before the glitch, there were Tim and Jason, arguing, and nearly off camera was the shadow of a man, nothing substantial, no features to identify. After the glitch, there was a shattered mirror, several pieces of abandoned technology, and no shadow. There were no glitches on any of the other cameras. There was no record of any man entering the building, or leaving it. He simply disappeared.

By 6:30 in the morning, Barbara said, kneading her temples, “I don’t have it. I don’t. I thought that there had to be another way, and obviously there is, but I can’t understand it. How did they just . . . *vanish?* This isn’t duplicate footage. No one has altered this CCTV in any way, and the video from the street outside just shows them going in, nobody coming out. It’s like they literally disappear into thin air, all three of them. ”

Dick was staring off into space, jaw tense. The Batcave was bathed in shadows, a few fluorescent lights illuminating him and Babs in the early morning. Ordinary objects and machinery looked monstrous in the half-light. The waterfall roared in the distance.

Damian was curled up asleep on the floor, still in his gala suit, with Dick’s suit jacket pillowing his head. Dick was going to have to carry him up soon.

Bruce was out, looking. Checking contacts, hideouts. The boys had not just *disappeared*, so he was out searching for them.

Dick said, still staring off into nothing, “What if we’re wrong? What if it wasn’t anybody else?”

Barbara stopped kneading her temples and looked up at him. “What

do you mean?"

Dick rubbed his mouth with his fingers, forcefully. He was trying not to think about what he was thinking about. "Babs," he said. "What if . . . Jason, what if he—"

The memories from several years ago were rising now, driven into place by fear and exhaustion: the grisly stillness that only came after a vicious fight, the blood pooling around Tim's head, the eerie, otherworldly rage of this new, Pit-mad Jason that had climbed up from hell. The horror inside of Dick when he'd run in and seen Tim, blood-soaked and broken and unmoving, after Jason had tried to—

That day, Dick had been sure that he'd lost both of them forever: Tim to murder, Jason to a terrible, permanent estrangement. He wasn't sure how he was going to face it if it was happening again.

"Jason didn't do this, Dick," said Barbara immediately, soothing. She pushed her hair behind her ear. It was red and shining, even in the harsh, ugly light. "You know he wouldn't, not now. You told me he's been dropping by to see *Damian,* for God's sake. He wouldn't just—"

Dick looked down at her. His voice was nearly nonexistent. "But what if he *did?* What if Tim is—"

They heard the sound of the Batmobile driving up, low and swift. The engine cut. The dark figure of Batman appeared, sleek and shadowed and barely visible.

Then the cowl disappeared, and Bruce looked at them tiredly. A night's growth of stubble rasped as he scratched absently at his jaw. His expression told Dick everything he needed to know.

"Thank you, Barbara," Bruce said to her, ever well-mannered and gracious. "I'm sure Alfred will have breakfast waiting if you want it. You're welcome to stay here for the night. Both of you," he added, looking at Dick.

Dick reached down and bundled Damian up into his arms. At thirteen, he was really too old to be carried, but he was still small enough that Dick easily made do and carted him towards the stairs, back up to the Manor.

He left Barbara and Bruce to chat with Alfred and tucked Damian into his bed, shoving Titus over to make room for him.

Afterward, he sat beside the bed with Damian's even breathing by his right ear and watched the sun lighten the curtains, putting his elbows on his knees and his fists to his mouth. The events were running around in his head like a broken record, like he could make sense of it all by merely replaying it: Jason, leaving as soon as Tim arrived. The bomb going off. Tim and Damian out of the building. Tim and Jason, back inside of it. Tim and Jason, gone.

Gone, and without the slightest hint of where they'd disappeared to.

Jason did not kill Tim. He didn't. He wouldn't have—

He might have.

It was nearly an hour later before Dick looked around to see Bruce standing in the doorway, his broad silhouette blocking out the dim light from the hallway. When he noticed that he had Dick's attention, he crooked a finger, motioning with his head.

Dick slowly unfolded himself and went out into the hallway.

Bruce gently shut the door. The morning was pale and blue and cold. Bruce put one of his big, calloused hands on the back of Dick's neck, a gesture he had used for calm and reassurance since Dick was a child.

"We'll find them," he told Dick, responsible and sure.

Something loosened in Dick's chest, but the broken record was still playing.

"B," he murmured, so as not to wake Damian. "I'm—"

"Bludhaven was quiet tonight," said Bruce quietly. "The girls were watching it. Stay here and get some sleep."

"Dad," said Dick. "Dad, you don't think that Jason—"

"No," said Bruce, picking up on his train of thought immediately. That meant that he, too, had considered it, and that was not comforting at all. "Dick, they didn't like each other, but that doesn't mean—"

"B, I can't stop seeing Tim *that day,* and I just—Dad, if Jay—"

"He didn't," said Bruce, firm and immediate, in a voice that Dick had never questioned. "He loves you, Dick. Even if he can't ever say it. He wouldn't jeopardize your relationship just because he doesn't like Tim. And don't count Tim out, either. Tim would have fought, and Tim

would have fought to tell us if Jason were attacking him."

Dick's muscles unwound a little. "And their phones," he murmured. "I guess their phones wouldn't have both been there."

"Something did happen," said Bruce somberly. "And we'll find out what it was, and we'll find them, understand?"

He was Batman, sure and confident and in charge. Dick felt an anxious spring inside of himself unwind; of course they would solve this. They were Nightwing and Batman.

Then something shifted in his expression, and he was Bruce Wayne, Dick Grayson's father. " *After,"* he added pointedly, ruffling Dick's hair slightly, "you get some sleep."

"Well," Dick said, "I pity whoever's dealing with Jason and Tim, anyway."

Bruce let out a ghost of a chuckle. Dick went back to his old room, which smelled like the laundry soap Alfred used, and collapsed into bed.

He sent Barbara a text: *Did you go home?*

The answer was quick. *yeah. get some sleep ok we'll keep looking later*

Wally's text was close on her heels. *Nothing, but nbd, we'll find em. Want me to come over*

No. Family stuff.

Call you in the morning?

Dick only responded with a quiet, sincere *thank you* and then rolled over, too tired to even change out of his shirt and slacks.

Tired as he was, it took him a long time to fall asleep.

Where, was his last conscious thought, *could they possibly be?*

* * *

Tim and Jason couldn't have been there for longer than two hours, and they really probably hadn't gone *that* far in the grand scheme of things, but Tim already felt hopelessly lost.

He *knew* he was hopelessly lost. They were in a place designed to get people lost. He just didn't like *feeling* like it.

"Let's try and keep our hands on the left wall," said Tim. "I want to see if there's any rhyme or reason to this."

Jason swore at him in a way that indicated that he found this a stupid idea, but he put his hand against the left wall, so Tim counted it as a tentative win.

Until the left wall swerved. Tim and Jason followed it. In response, the Labyrinth spit them into a huge circular room with ten doors pressed into thick, dirty brick walls. Far above, from too dark and far up to see, water dripped, slow and sluggish. *Drip, drip, drip.* Caged lanterns were fixed between all of the doors, giving the room an old, wine cellar-y feel.

"Cute," said Jason. "I don't think left walls like you. Figures."

Tim glared at him. "Got a better idea, dipshit?"

Jason's grin was wide and mirthless and infuriating. "I don't think you can logic your way out of this, boygenius. She said it's eating us." He had his cool swagger back; the restless anger from the fireplace room was nowhere to be seen. Tim couldn't tell if it was a facade or truth. Either way, Tim was annoyed. "It's just fucking with you, man."

He was going to be so pissed if he died in here with *Jason Todd.*

"And you're, what. Just feeling fine and dandy about that?"

Jason inspected one of the doors. "I am feeling a little damp, if that's what you're asking. Actually, I'm feeling *snacky,* is what I'm feeling."

Tim massaged the bridge of his nose. "Can you just. Pick a door."

Damn. Now that Jason mentioned it, he *was* pretty hungry. And thirsty.

He was only marginally comforted by the fact that Rhea had said that the Labyrinth provided them with food sometimes. *Sometimes.*

"Eenie, meenie, mini—" said Jason.

Before he could finish the ditty, and before Tim could finish weighing out the pros and cons of physical harm, a low sound echoed through the tall room.

Jason stopped instantly. The hair on the back of Tim's neck rose.

The sound echoed again: a high, eerie reverberation. It ricocheted around the room, growing louder and louder.

It was a woman wailing. It wasn't a woman wailing. It was the sound a woman would have made if she had no lungs to sustain. It was the sound a song would have made if it were a scream.

It was a deeply *wrong* sound, and it made every hair on Tim's body stood on end.

All at once, it cut off.

Jason said, "Okay."

The floor heaved, a wave untethered to any source. Bricks slammed against each other. The world rocked dangerously in a quick, violent earthquake.

Tim rolled, managing to keep to his feet. He came out of it in a crouch, wincing as the unmoored corners of bricks dug into his knees.

As soon as it had started, it ended. The world went still again. *Drip, drip, drip.*

The room was a wreck. Upended bricks and shattered mortar created a wildly uneven floor, jagged edges poking up all over the place. It looked like a tiller had gone over the whole thing in a single second.

Jason said, "Hey? What the fuck. Ow."

Tim glanced over and saw Jason pulling himself to his feet; he'd been thrown to the ground while Tim had more or less kept his footing. This gave Tim a small kernel of triumphant meanness that he estimated would sustain him for a good two hours.

Tim pulled up out of his crouch. "Pick," he said, "a door."

"I have decided," said Jason, heading for a door, "that this entire Labyrinth is not nice."

"Might be trying to kill us, even," said Tim.

Deep inside of himself, Tim was secretly glad for Jason's unflappable derision. The wailing/shrieking sound had rattled him, and he was trying to inwardly ground himself again.

Another faint sound reached Tim's ears.

Jason tried a door.

"Well, this one's locked, so that's out," said Jason, moving on to the next one.

The sound again: a faint scraping noise, like something was being dragged over the floor.

Jason tugged on another door.

Tim reached into his suit jacket and freed one of the slim, wickedly sharp knives hidden there.

"You could help," said Jason crossly. "You don't have to stand there in the middle of the goddamn floor—"

"Shh," said Tim.

Jason made a dismissive, irritated sound and jiggled another door handle, which, from the sound of it, proved entirely ineffective.

"Which door did we come in through?" Tim asked quietly, still listening for more sounds.

"Duh," said Jason. "The open one—"

He cut himself off, because he noticed what Tim had noticed: there were no open doors. All were shut.

"Well," said Jason. "Fuck."

There was a tense note in his voice now.

The sound came again: something moving.

"Heard that one," said Jason, voice much lower. Out of the corner of his eye, Tim watched Jason move closer to him.

He understood it: Jason might hate him, and he hated Jason, but at least they knew what they were up against with each other. Everything else around them was unfamiliar, and alien, and strangely frightening.

"All the doors have keyholes," said Jason, still quietly. His eyes, like Tim's, were scanning the room in a quick *left right up left right behind*

up left right behind .

Tim looked. They did: little identical golden keyholes that glinted in lantern light.

“Where do we think the keys are?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Where is that *sound* coming from—”

Something moved again: the dragging sound.

A thunderous crack boomed through the room .

Jason and Tim whipped around. The wall between two of the doors had grown a monstrously large fissure, as jagged as a lightning strike and more than twice as tall as Tim.

Something very big and very strong was behind that wall. And it wanted out.

“Tell me I’m not the only one armed here,” said Jason.

Tim made a noise in the back of his throat. “Please.”

His knife crackled with electricity.

Something slammed into the wall again. The fissure grew fissures. The wall sprayed bits of debris.

Every muscle in Tim’s body was tensed, adrenaline searing his blood.

The third hit was enough to make the wall explode, rock and brick and mortar flying. The thing dragged itself through.

It turned out that what it was dragging was one of its legs, twisted and grotesque, clearly shattered and healed incorrectly. The other leg and two enormously muscular arms propelled it forward.

“What,” said Tim, “the hell?”

It was a monster, plain and simple. It had the head of a bull, with two colossal curled horns jutting out from either side of its head. Its eyes had no pupil or whites; they were as molten orange as burning coals, narrowed in rage. Its arms were human, ending in massive, knotted hands, but its back end was all bull, with hooves the size of car tires

and a long, ropey tail.

“Drake,” said Jason, “You’re gonna need a bigger knife.”

The thing threw back its head and bellowed, furious and deafening.

Even with one leg out of commission, it could still charge alarmingly fast.

Jason rolled one way, and Tim rolled the other. Whirling, Tim slashed at its flank as it ran past, driving his knife in as deep as he could while still watching out for the hooves.

It bellowed again.

“Jesus,” snarled Tim, darting away to put some distance between him and it. The knife had barely broken skin, and Tim was no amateur stabber. Its hide was like iron.

“That thing has skin like Killer Croc,” Jason growled, his own knife in his hand; they had had the same idea, which nettled Tim.

It faced them again, and this time, it leaped—impossibly fast, impossibly huge.

Tim darted away again, quick and agile, but it had not leapt for him; it landed in front of Jason.

It opened its huge, bristled mouth and breathed out a cloud of broiling, charred smoke. Slender forks of lightning flickered from inside the creature’s maw, and its eyes leaked more smoke.

Jason was fast, too, but not fast enough; he gave a short, startled grunt of pain and vanished from Tim’s view.

Tim reeled further away from the smoke.

“Drake,” shouted Jason from somewhere on the other side of the wall of smoke, “don’t let it touch you. It’s toxic.”

Of course it is, thought Tim. They couldn’t just be fighting a huge bull-man thing. They had to be fighting a huge *toxin-breathing* bull-man thing.

There were two quick, snapping gunshots.

The thing roared, tossing its head furiously, but it hadn’t been

stopped, or even hindered. Tim wondered if the bullets had done anything at all. Maybe it had felt like being bit by two gnats.

It glared in Jason's direction, but its own smoke seemed to be rendering the thing blind, too, so it couldn't see Jason.

Something glinted from around its neck.

Tim said, "You have *got* to be kidding me."

The thing tossed its head again, and there it was: a shining key, looking like a toy hanging from around that enormous neck, fastened in place by a slender chord.

Sighing, he yelled, "The key is around its neck, Todd."

Jason yelled back, "*You have got to be kidding me."*

The monster turned and charged at Tim.

Tim backed up, and waited.

It was pretty difficult to wait while a gigantic bull head with horns longer than his entire body was barreling at him like a bullet train, but he did it.

At the last second, Tim sprang, leaping away from the wall and rolling as fast as he could. He heard the monster trying to stop, too late.

There was a noise like a thunderclap, and debris rained down from the ceiling.

Tim winced as he pulled up out of his roll and sprinted away from it. This floor was doing him no favors, and he wasn't in his Robin suit to protect his skin. He was going to be black and blue at the end of this.

Jason appeared next to him. His jacket was shredded around his shoulder, where an ugly raw wound was visible. Angry burns slashed across one of his hands.

Jason didn't pay attention to his own injuries. He stared calculatingly at the bull-thing that was currently yanking one of its horns free of the wall, shaking its head slowly back and forth.

"That was stupid," said Jason, "but pretty ballsy."

"At least we know *it* is stupid," said Tim tersely. "I don't think we can

kill it, not with the weapons we have. Our best bet is to take the key and use it to get out of here."

"So what you're saying," said Jason, both of their eyes tracking the thing's progress as it staggered back to its hoof/hands, "is that one of us has to grab the key, and one of us has to be a distraction."

Tim said, "Yup."

Jason said, "I call not being the distraction."

"And how do I know you won't just take the key and leave me here to get eaten?" Tim said testily.

"Drake," said Jason, rolling his eyes. "I'm not going to leave you here to get eaten by a minotaur."

"Then *you* be the distraction."

"No way—"

Tim was too busy trying not to get skewered by horns like shish kebab to hear the end of the sentence.

The bull-thing whirled again, snorting and snarling, its eyes livid orange. They zeroed in on Tim, and it bared its teeth, smoking gushing from between its jaws.

"Cool," said Tim. "Distraction."

It ran at him. Tim dodged left.

"Stop dodging!" snapped Jason.

"I'm trying not to die!" Tim replied.

His brain was snarled up into overdrive, snatching and discarding possible scenarios. He had decided too quickly that he did not want to be stuck through by a giant bull horn; he needed to be less certain about that fact so he could keep dancing in front of it. He turned around and faced it again, but it had fixed on Jason.

Jason didn't move as it charged, either, but there was no wall behind him. He just stared at it in a nearly bored way. He did not look at all as though he had decided not to be run through by a horn.

Tim, hoping that Jason had some sort of plan, began to run towards it

from the side.

At the same time, Jason stepped enough to the side that the monster went past him. A millisecond later, he turned and grabbed at the thing's damaged leg, driving it down with his entire body weight.

The mangled leg came down on a big, jagged rock sticking out of the ground, and its next bellow was a scream of incensed pain.

Despite the tossing, it was still enough for Tim to slip underneath its huge arm, cut the chord, and run back around the same arm in one breath.

The monster wrenched its leg back, and Jason tumbled away, landing on his back with a painful *oomph.*

It opened its mouth again. Smoke billowed out.

Tim sure hoped Jason was moving, because he'd stopped watching the fight in order to run to the nearest door and pray to whatever god there was that the key fit.

The monster brayed.

The key did not fit.

Tim didn't waste his breath on cursing. He just ran to the next door.

Something crawled up his arm, white-hot and burning. He snatched his hand away from the coils of smoke that had crept up on him, and kept running. He had no idea where Jason was. The room was growing dark with black, flickering clouds.

The key did not fit into the second door.

Jason yelled from somewhere, " *Drake!"*

"Working on it!" Tim shouted back. He ran faster, nearly skidding past the third door.

When that key did not fit, Tim began to wonder if this was where he died, trying to find a lock for a key that perhaps did not fit any lock at all.

He heard the thing running, its huge, heavy footfalls as loud as earthquakes.

“I said over *here,* asshole,” said Jason Todd’s voice, annoyed, and another gunshot sounded. The footfalls retreated somewhat.

Tim made it to the fourth door.

The key slid in. The lock turned. Tim flung open the door.

“Jason!” he shouted. He didn’t look what was in the corridor beyond. He was too busy searching for Jason through the billows of smoke.

For a moment, there was silence.

Then Jason appeared, bolting between two hills of clouds. The monster erupted out of the smoke behind him, eyes incensed.

Tim moved out of the way, holding the door. Jason ran through it.

Tim slammed the door. There was a colossal, ugly *crunch,* and the door bulged inward. Jason and Tim ran.

Tim did not want to admit that he was tired before Jason did, so they ran for a while, zig-zagging through cold, bricked tunnels. Finally, though, his lungs shrieking, he managed, “Hang on.”

Jason slowed down instantly, chest heaving.

“Think we lost it,” said Tim, clutching the stitch in his side. He could long-distance run, and his stamina as Red Robin was no joke, but full-on sprinting for long minutes at a time was asking a little much.

“We better have.” Jason winced and flexed his burned fingers. “Hell. Fuck.”

They stood still for several minutes, getting their breath back.

After a little while, in a calculating sort of voice, Jason said abruptly, “Surprised you didn’t let me die in there.”

And Tim was irritated again. He wasn’t in any mood to untangle weird comments. He examined his own burned wrist and said curtly, “Obviously.”

Jason’s head snapped up. “And what is that supposed to mean? I wouldn’t have let you die in there *either,* Drake. In case you forgot, *I* was the one keeping that thing off you.”

This was true, and it did nothing for Tim’s mood. “Maybe,” he said

crossly, not caring that this was a vaguely nonsensical answer, “but we’ll never know what’s going to happen next time, will we.”

Jason stared at him, expression darkening. “You and your entire fucking family. I am not a ticking time bomb, Drake. I may have a temper but everything I do is *very* premeditated, and if you’re talking about the goddamn Tower thing, that includes that. If I wanted to kill you then, I would have, but I didn’t.”

Tim stared at him. Something ugly simmered up his throat.

He had never confronted Jason about that day. It had taken him forty-two hours to come out of his blood-loss coma and a week before he could walk up and down the stairs without being exhausted by it. Dick had shadowed him relentlessly, restless and broodingly furious at the Red Hood and Bruce by turns. Even Tim couldn’t talk him out of his black mood (as much as Tim had been able to talk, which wasn’t much), and the only reason Tim hadn’t kicked him out to go play with friends and touch some grass was because he got the impression that Dick needed Tim during that time more than Tim needed protecting.

Bruce had come in four days after the attack and told Tim—and by extension Dick—that the Red Hood would never touch him again.

“And if he does?” Tim had croaked through his ruined, stitched throat, understandably doubtful, he thought.

Bruce had said, in his cold, authoritative Batman voice, “He won’t,” and swept out of the room.

Tim forgave him a little the next day when Bruce took work off from the office and Batman, at last pried Dick away to go remind himself that life was still out in the world, and sat around watching movies with Tim and making sure he took his painkillers and kept the swelling in his throat and ribs down.

That had been a good day. But now, with Jason’s derisive, hard expression in front of him, he could only remember the fight, the way he had nearly beaten Jason, the way Jason had finally cut part of Tim’s neck, shot him in the shoulder, and closed his fingers around Tim’s throat—the terror of realizing he couldn’t throw Jason’s brute strength off him—the slow horror of suffocation—the way Jason’s teeth had been bared like a hyena’s, the cold certainty in his eyes . . .

Tim had had nightmares for weeks.

“Then what was the reason?”

The hot fury in Tim’s voice, for whatever goddamn reason, seemed to baffle Jason slightly. “What?”

“Then *what,”* Tim repeated, slow and dangerous, “*was the reason?* You nearly slit my throat, not to mention all the other damage you did. *What was the reason,* if you weren’t going to kill me?*”*

Jason stared at him. His expression, for once, was unreadable.

“It wasn’t about you,” said Jason, after a long minute.

“Oh, yeah?” Tim’s sarcasm could have given Jason’s a run for its money in that moment. “Because it for sure *happened* to me, I can tell you that much.”

Jason glared. “You’re not that fucking special, Drake. It was a message for Bruce, and it came across crystal fucking clear for once.”

The world rocked, just a little—only this time, it was in Tim’s head, and not this weird Labyrinth messing with them.

Jason’s words settled sharply into place, poking him in more places than it should have.

It wasn’t about you.

He had nearly died, and he hadn’t been able to breathe for months, and he couldn’t look Bruce in the eyes when he talked about Jason with that rueful fondness he got sometimes, and he had never been able to forgive Dick, and this had been sitting on his chest for months, and it *hadn’t even been about him.*

Of course it hadn’t. Of course. It was never about Tim.

“The point is,” said Jason, after Tim kept not saying anything, “we’re stuck here, and if I can help it, I won’t let you fucking get mauled by giant horns, okay?”

If Tim hadn’t known better, he would have said Jason looked uncomfortable.

Tim said, “Whatever.”

He turned around and marched down the tunnel.

They didn't speak for a while after that. Tim's hand stung viciously, a constant nagging sensation that made him want to itch it. He needed a disinfectant for it, really, and so did Jason, but what were they going to do? There was nothing down here to help with any of that.

He heard Dick's voice nagging at him, telling him to *please remember that you don't have a spleen and infection is a much bigger danger to you so could you just—*

Well, he remembered. And fat lot of good it did him down here.

Down here. Tim had unconsciously begun to think of it as *down,* though he didn't have any proof that they were *down* anywhere. Just because the walls felt like they were closing in on them didn't mean anything.

He was getting really hungry now, and he was getting cranky about it. There was no way to mark time, but it had to have been hours. A lot of them.

The brick tunnels had transubstantiated to cold gray stone. The water was gone, but without the trickling sound, it was oppressively silent.

They didn't speak. While Tim walked, carefully observing every stone and cranny for anything suspicious, his subconscious battled with Rhea's scant information. A race. An end goal, somewhere. A Labyrinth, killing them slowly. Slowly, on purpose. Quick deaths were apparently not its thing.

Could have fooled him. Being crushed to death by a giant bull-thing seemed pretty quick to him, personally.

They walked for a long time. Stone tunnels grew taller, and then smaller. Bizarre grates that led nowhere studded the walls, metal curling into bizarre patterns. Sometimes he could have sworn he heard voices, and from the way Jason's head turned, he knew Jason heard it, too. But the voices always seemed to be coming from behind stone.

Once, they heard someone crying. They both stopped unconsciously, turning to look, but before one of them said anything, the crying stopped.

Strange insects scuttled in and out of the shadows, disproportionately large and many-legged. Once, one them lunged at Tim's foot. It was the size of a small dog, so Tim reached for his knife again before a gunshot rang through the tunnels and the thing flopped over,

twitching, half of it blown apart. It looked like a spined rock with big ugly pincers growing out its face.

If it were Dick, they would have joked about it. If it were Damian, Tim would have asked him what deep-sea creature it looked like.

Since it was Jason, Tim said tersely, “Nice shot.”

In reply, Jason grunted, eyeing the walls warily.

And that was the only interaction they had for the hours that they walked.

Hunger began to pound in a dull, consistent ache in his belly. His hand and elbow throbbed. He could feel the bruises forming on his knees and legs.

Still, neither of them said anything, a stubborn, loud silence. Tim’s mind kept grasping for an answer, a way out of this, a logical progression.

It was a strange, terrifying place, and it felt older than time. Old and unknowable. The air was cold, and in the tunnels it should have felt stale, but instead it was the opposite: it felt alive. They were not alone in this place, and Tim could feel it in the air.

The Labyrinth had stopped giving them forks. It was simply one long, winding tunnel.

Just when Tim was sure the silence was so oppressive he was going to have to say something, they rounded a corner, and about fifty feet away was an open doorway.

Well. *That* felt like it had 'trap' written all over it, but what was he supposed to do, turn around?

But he still stopped before he entered the room fully, wary of what would happen. Jason didn’t try to go past him.

It was a large room, nearly bigger than the last. The light came from lanterns studded in the stone again, but this time, it was as faint and flickering as candlelight. The walls were tiled with faded, looming figures. A fountain stood in the middle, dusty and decrepit and empty, spun with cobwebs. The thought of water made Tim’s mouth feel drier than before.

On the other side of the room, a tall blue door stood shut. A huge, ornate knocker glinted dully. Even from where he was standing, Tim could see that it had no doorknob.

Great.

“If something big with horns crashes out of one of these walls,” said Jason, echoing Tim’s thoughts, the first thing either of them had said in a very long time, “I’m going to be very upset.”

“Well,” said Tim, eyeing everything carefully inside the room, “we can’t go back to the other big thing with horns that crashed out of a wall, so . . .”

Before Tim could finish examining the room, Jason shoved him through the doorway and into the room proper.

“*Hey,”* said Tim, whirling on him.

Jason eyed the walls. When nothing happened, he stepped in after Tim.

“Just thought I’d let you trigger the booby traps,” he told Tim, walking around him.

“You,” said Tim, through gritted teeth, “are the fucking worst.”

“Yeah, yeah.” His gaze slid past Tim and focused on something behind him. His face instantly transformed into something calculated and wary.

Tim turned.

“That,” Tim said, “is my backpack.”

“Funny,” said Jason, not sounding amused at all, “that’s what I was going to say.”

In front of the fountain, where there had for sure been nothing before, two bulging backpacks sat side by side. One of them was plain black with a red streak across it. The other was Tim’s dull green one, with a black T in the corner. It was, Tim discovered as he got closer, even still ripped in the same place that his real one was, where he’d caught it on a subway door one day years ago.

Tim didn’t touch either one, examining them carefully for some sort of proof of counterfeit.

He said, “Well, that’s . . . interesting.”

“Drake,” said Jason, in a different voice.

Tim followed his gaze.

There had been a wall there a moment ago, Tim was pretty sure. He’d double and triple-checked the room before being rudely shoved into it. But now it wasn’t a wall. It was a weird, foggy screen, showing them some random street somewhere.

Screen wasn’t the right word. If Tim hadn’t known better, he would have said they were looking through a window, laced with frost.

Jason inched closer.

“I know where that is,” he murmured, staring through it. Snow fell gently, specks of pale blue against the night. There was a road, the wet asphalt glinting in the streetlights. Not much was happening; only the occasional car drove past, headlights bright against the night.

It took Tim a moment to realize that he couldn’t see through the glass very well because there was thick gold lettering embossed over the window. Tilting his head and mirroring the letters in his head, he read: JONES AND JONES JEWELRY, SERVING YOU SINCE 1949.

“This is the J and J down by thirty-second street,” said Jason. “It’s in Gotham.”

His hesitation matched Tim’s. It made him sound much younger.

Tim said, “It can’t . . . be this easy.”

“Maybe it was a one-monster thing,” said Jason, but the hesitation was still there. Like Tim, he was clearly wary of things that looked too good to be true, and *easy* was never involved in anything the Bats did.

Jason reached over to touch the window.

The second his hand came up, the window vanished between one blink and the next. The wall was as solid as it had ever been.

“Wish walls would stay walls around here,” grumbled Tim, unsettled.

A new voice said, “You should treasure your glimpses of your world. They will be few and far between.”

Jason and Tim whirled around.

Beside the fountain was a woman. She was tall, her hair long and black and threaded through with gold, her face regal and cold. Her dress, like Rhea's, was long and white.

"Hello, Jason Todd," she said, her smile curled and small. "Hello, Timothy Drake."

She snapped her fingers, and the fountain began spraying water, no dust or cobwebs in sight. A table appeared, laden with sandwiches, neat piles of glistening pork, fresh fruit, and thick slices of buttered bread.

"If that is poisoned," Jason told the woman thoughtfully, "guess I'm going out quick."

In the end, they ate because there wasn't any choice. And Tim was really, *really* hungry. The bread was thick and soft, the fruit sweet and ripe, the sandwiches seasoned and fat. Tim barely cared. It could have been bland gravy and he would have wolfed it down. He had to be careful with his hand, but the taste of food made him forget the pain for a minute.

He inhaled three sandwiches before he thought to ask, "And who exactly are you?"

The woman observed him with bright, clever eyes. A smile lurked around her mouth, but it wasn't pleasant, or warm—it was the smile of a crocodile observing its next meal. "I am Silia. I am the first spirit of the Labyrinth."

Tim couldn't decide what he disliked more: the fact that she had said *spirit,* or the fact that she had said *first.*

Jason eyed her skeptically. "You're telling me that you're, what. A ghost? Like of the *ooOOooh* kind? Lady. Please."

Tim mimicked his *ooOOooh* with a lot more flair, and a lot more derision. Jason flipped him off. It was a lot less intimidating than it usually was, with his ripped dress shirt and his raw, wounded elbow and shoulder.

"My body died here, if that is what you are asking," Silia informed them.

Tim paused before he popped another juicy blackberry in his mouth. “How long ago was that?”

Her smile didn’t flicker. “Centuries. Congratulations on surviving your first test. Rhea is already three tests in. I would wish you luck, but Rhea doesn’t need luck, and it certainly won’t help you.”

Jason and Tim glanced at each other.

“Excuse me,” started Jason.

“Did you say *tests?”* Tim finished.

“ *Three?”* demanded Jason, reaching for another chicken leg.

“So, wait a minute,” said Tim, his mouth full of more blackberries. “You’re saying that we have to pass *tests* to get out of this place.”

Her smile was more of a smirk now, and Tim hated it. He hated not being in the know. Rhea had given him a paragraph about this place, tops, and he had zero resources.

“Tests,” Silia agreed, gesturing to the Labyrinth at large. “Sometimes they’re monsters, like our friend the minotaur. Sometimes—”

“Wait,” said Jason, sitting back in his chair. His eyes were narrowed, flinty. He was forgetting to look sarcastic and haughty, which made his expression much more thoughtful than usual. “The *minotaur?* That was a minotaur? This is like, *Theseus’ Labyrinth* type thing?”

Tim blinked at Jason. Something wiggled in the far corner of his mind, something about myths and legends and stuff he hadn’t thought about in a long time. “Theseus . . .?” he asked.

For once, Jason did not respond with something cutting or mocking. He looked at Tim and explained doubtfully, clearly thinking something else through, “It’s a Greek myth thing. The minotaur was born, looked like *that—”* he jerked his thumb over his shoulder— “so they built this big old labyrinth to hold it. The king’s enemies were fed to the minotaur. But it’s at the center of the maze.” He looked accusingly at Silia. “That is supposed to be, like, the final boss, or whatever.”

Silia folded her hands, pacing leisurely away from them towards the fountain. “Your knowledge is unexpected. This is that very place.”

There was a beat of silence.

“The *mythical* place,” said Jason, voice very flat.

“Did the minotaur feel mythical when it burned your hands, Jason Todd?” Silia asked serenely. When he didn’t say anything, she continued, “This Labyrinth has grown from what it was then into something else. Rhea explained it a little to you. This place has its own mind, its own heart. Do not underestimate it.”

Tim pushed away from the table. “And why are you telling us this?”

She turned to look at him, head high and expression lofty. Her eyes drilled into Tim, cold and unpitying. “It is my lot, now. I lost the race.”

There was a very specific silence. Tim wasn’t sure he believed in an afterlife, but he at least thought that when people died, that was it. The idea that if they lost, they could be trapped here still, after their bodies were gone . . .

"So, what," Jason said. "This weird lady just runs this race over and over again, killing people as she goes? What's the point of *that?*"

Tim lifted an eyebrow.

"You're not the only one who can ask questions, Drake," Jason said.

"The race happens once every seven years," said Silia. "It is for Markos and Rhea. They are the real prisoners of this place. You have been pitted against Rhea. When she wins, she will enter the world once more, and Markos will return here. Seven years hence, he will race an unfortunate and then reclaim his place out in the sun. They trade.”

Tim didn’t understand. “Wait. Who’s Markos?”

“The man who trapped you here so that Rhea could have her competition, and eventually her replacement.”

Jason’s face darkened with fury.

Tim remembered, then. The slim, bearded man with the bland, forgettable features. The one who had been there when they looked into the mirror.

“So he . . . knew this would happen to us,” said Tim, carefully. He wanted to understand before he got angry. “He pushed us in here to

race with Rhea so . . .”

“So you could lose,” Silia replied. “And when you lose, Rhea will be free to leave this place for seven years, and Markos will return. It is a cycle. ”

“And we . . .” said Tim.

Silia turned to face him. Tim suddenly wasn’t sure he wanted the answer to that trailed off question.

“You,” she said, “will be trapped here, when you lose, and you will not leave. Your spirit may, eventually. But it's difficult to find a way out, once you are in. Even the dead have trouble managing it."

There was another very specific silence. Tim looked at Jason, and Jason looked at him. For once, their expressions matched, and they both said very clearly, *what the fuck.*

Jason rallied first. “So we won’t lose,” he said, shrugging elegantly, his cool, scornful face back. “You said tests.”

Tim would never have said it out loud, but he was grateful for the redirection. Tests were concrete. Tests were something he could focus on. The looming, too-big-to-consider idea that even if they *died,* they wouldn’t be free of this twisting, turning, sentient maze . . .

“Tests,” agreed Silia, making her way back to the table. “Monsters. Puzzles. Traps. My fellow spirits have their own fun, sometimes. Tricks. The Labyrinth is specifically tailored to you. When you have made it through enough tests (assuming you make it through at all), it will present you with a doorway out.”

Her smile curled unexpectedly again, an alligator’s amusement. “But Rhea isn’t going to lose.”

Tim said, “There’s a first time for everything. Or second time, in this case. And I don’t plan on losing.”

“That,” said Silia, “is what they all say.”

“How many tests are there?” Jason said, flicking his fork idly from side to side.

Silia shrugged. “Impossible to say. But Rhea is still winning, as of right now.”

“If there isn’t a set number,” argued Tim at once, “that’s impossible to say, logically.”

“Logic,” Silia said, mockingly, dress swishing from side to side. “Logic. See how far logic gets you here, Timothy Drake. It’ll kill you, if you let it.”

“So you don’t know if she’s winning,” said Tim.

Silia looked a little annoyed for the first time. “Enjoy your meal, and your water. They won’t last long. And you’re welcome for the gifts.”

Between one blink and the next, she vanished.

“Getting real fucking tired,” grumbled Jason, “of stuff just fucking disappearing around here.”

Tim glanced around the room again. “Think this is another test?”

“Maybe,” said Jason, biting into another sandwich. “Maybe not. That door still doesn’t have a doorknob, you’ll notice.”

Tim ignored him and walked around to their backpacks, dragging his away to take note of what was in it.

Clothes, mostly. They were his, all sensible, sturdy attire, including boots. He was severely creeped out by this, but he tried to ignore it while he took stock of the rest of the stuff.

Two water bottles, empty. He filled those in the fountain, remembering what Rhea and Silia had said. He drank as much of one as he could before he refilled it again, and went back to his backpack.

There was his toothbrush, which he thought was a absurdly kind of whatever had put it here. Toothpaste, his usual brand. A roll of toilet paper. Matches. A flashlight. A sleeping roll. Knives, which made sense. And . . .

A first aid kit. Hallelujah.

“This is weird as shit,” muttered Jason from behind him. “I thought this place was trying to kill us. But it gave us *toilet paper?”*

Tim turned. Jason was rifling through his own backpack, looking disgruntled.

“I think . . .” said Tim, ready for Jason to bite his head off at any

second and preparing mentally to bite back, “with what Rhea and Silia both said . . . it doesn’t want us to die right away. Remember what Rhea said? About starvation being a boring way to die? I think it wants a show out of us. It sounds like it’s—bored.”

Jason didn’t say anything immediately. When Tim looked at him again, Jason had that odd, thoughtful expression on his face again.

When Jason caught him looking, he said crossly, going back to his backpack, “Cool. A weird bored Labyrinth. With you, of all people.”

Tim rolled his eyes and said, “Yeah, and you’re a fucking walk in the park.”

Jason said blackly, “Motherfucker.”

Tim pulled out the first aid kit and busied himself with his burned hand and wrist, hissing when the disinfectant hit raw skin, bandaging them neatly. He changed into sturdy black pants and a black t-shirt and discarded his ruined dress clothes. No use in bringing them along.

When he was done with that, he reached in and pulled out the last item: a watch.

“Jesus,” he muttered.

“What?”

Tim turned. Jason had also changed, and his arm was already bandaged, so he must have had a first-aid kit, too. “According to this watch, it’s 7:27.”

“In the *morning?* Goddammit.”

There was another silence as they both counted. They had been in the Labyrinth for nearly nine hours.

Jason’s voice was surly when he said, “I think we should sleep in turns. I’ll take first watch.”

Tim’s silence must have stretched on for a bit too long, because Jason swore under his breath and said, “I’m *not going to do anything to you, Drake.* I’ll wake you up if any shit starts looking suspicious, or if a doorknob magically pops into existence.”

Tim weighed his pros and cons. The big con of it all was that he

actually did need sleep, especially if the Labyrinth was going to throw more minotaurs at him.

Jason said, “God. Drake. Cross my heart and hope to die. It’s just you and me in here, bad as that is. You’ve got to start trusting me at some point.”

Tim said, “Wake me up in four hours.”

He bundled up his suit jacket, put it on his backpack, and made himself as comfortable as he could.

He didn’t think he was going to sleep, but as soon as his head hit his makeshift pillow, he was out like a light.

He had uneasy, strange dreams, and when Jason poked him awake, he kicked out, hard, automatic and still half-asleep.

“Hey, what the—oh, it’s you. Okay,” Tim said, rubbing sleep out of his eyes. Jason said several compound sentences to him, precise and furious, even bent over and clutching his ribs from where Tim’s neat kick had landed. Tim yawned, stretching, then climbed laboriously to his feet. The compound sentences lasted through all that, and then some.

“Have a good nap,” Tim told him cheerfully, dodging Jason’s half-hearted punch. He walked away, intending to go examine the door, and then the rest of the room.

Tim relieved himself, checked the door (which was still doorknob-less) and then wandered around, staring at the giant tiled pictures on the walls. In the flickering lantern light, they looked spooky and larger than life, not quite old, but certainly not new, either. They still had their color, but it was faded.

He began to run through a series of exercises, his body whirring to life like a well-oiled machine, in sync with his mind. Usually, these exercise were done with Dick after a long sparring session, and they were filled with jokes and dares and sometimes Damian. Tim was never quite as smooth as Dick was, but nobody could match Dick for grace.

He retreated inside of himself as his body moved, examining the situation again now that he’d had rest. With some of his exhaustion and hunger removed, he could think more clearly, though he would have killed for a cup of coffee.

Between one flip and the next, he looked over at Jason. Jason had his hand coiled loosely around a gun, facing away from Tim. Though his body was slack and relaxed, propped up on his backpack the way Tim had been, Tim had no idea if he was really asleep.

Tim stood on his hands. A big giant sentient maze. Possibly an alternate dimension.

It's Christmas in five days.

Four days, now.

Focus, Tim.

He was aware that this was a very fucked situation. Maze. Jason Todd. Ghosts. Minotaurs. *Mythology.* Oh, my.

It was just that his barometer for fucked situations was—well, fucked, because he'd been in too many of those.

Just another Tuesday, he could hear Kon grousing after something bizarre had happened. He was not afraid yet, really, but sometimes, unbidden, his heart would skip uneasily. He couldn't shake the feeling that even though they were not technically lost down here, because they couldn't go forwards or backwards, they were *about* to be lost, or in the process of getting lost.

It's Christmas in four days and you're here and this maze is digesting *you and there are monsters in here—*

And he was focusing. He was focusing because there was an end goal. It was a race. They could do that. He was fast and clever and—

And he had no resources and no friends and—

And the door still had no fucking doorknob.

Tim stopped his forms, blowing out an irritated breath.

Bouncing on the balls of his feet, he stared up at the vast walls with their huge, shadowed pictures and felt his stomach twist.

He was supposed to be with Damian today. It was early afternoon, now, and that meant that they should have been at lunch, noses cold from the winter air, lobbing snowballs at each other on the way back to the Manor. Damian was done with school until the new year. It was supposed to be just them, having fun, because though they'd learned

how to get along in the past few years, they had only recently learned how to have *fun* together.

Instead, he was here, in a place where every single minute felt exactly the same, and time stacked and wound in a way that was meaningless, and Jason Todd was there.

At least Jason had promised not to hurt him. And Tim actually kind of believed him, because everything in this place was against them, and they were the only two human people in it. Even an enemy was a friend in a place like this.

Not that Jason was an *enemy*. They just hated each other, and it didn't matter that sometimes, occasionally, somewhere deep inside, Tim sort of wished they didn't.

It would be easier if Tim only saw the nasty, impersonal, surly side of Jason. The side that Jason seemed determined to only present to Tim, and to Bruce, and to the world.

But he didn't just have that side. He had another side, and sometimes, when he didn't know Tim was watching, it would come out.

At least Jason seemed allergic to showing that side to Bruce, too. It wasn't just a Tim thing.

Focus.

Magical eating-people maze.

He spent the next four hours alternating between exercising, exploring the room, munching on some of the leftovers from Silia's dinner, and writing lists in his mind. He mentally calculated what he knew, what they'd seen, how the Labyrinth had worked so far, what things they might come up against in the future, and how they could win a race when the Labyrinth clearly decided how and when they went on.

There were an uncomfortable number of question marks.

He tried only once to break down the door. It did not work. Tim left that fight a little more bruised than before. *Labyrinth one, Tim zero.*

He immediately decided to not keep track of how many points the Labyrinth had versus him. Labyrinth, ancient, sentient *thing* versus Timothy Drake, human, seemed like a pretty decisive battle when one was purely calculating numbers.

It was nothing more than a building with some artificial intelligence built in, Tim tried to reason with himself. If he thought of it as smarter than he was, it was a lost cause. Rhea had said that the Labyrinth would pit them equally against each other, and he had to believe that, because otherwise the race was already lost and he would be—

Focus, Tim.

Tim went back to his forms.

Chapter 3

Outside of Jason Todd and Tim Drake, outside of everything, the Labyrinth seethed and unfurled and thought.

Two. Two. How to handle two.

It did not always start with a physical test for the replacements, but it had wanted to see if it could pick off one of them early, just to make things easier. That had not worked, but it did interest the Labyrinth.

It was only the beginning. The more the two boys moved through it, the more the Labyrinth learned about them, absorbed of them. It was an expert on human desperation, on pain, on hatred, on cruelty. It had been spawned by hatred and fear, and the more it consumed, the more it fed on the worst of humankind, the worse it became.

The Labyrinth was a wondrous, cruel thing.

It would do to these two boys what it always did with replacements: it would keep them alive, give them reprieve every so often, and then it would slowly draw them into the worst versions of themselves. Seven years it would feed. Death was only the beginning.

One of them would die early. The Labyrinth did not care which. It was intending on killing one of them as soon as possible.

The spirits inside the Labyrinth were restless already, woken by the promise of fresh blood. Silia was busy trying to torment Rhea, but when that inevitably failed to slow her, Silia would turn back to the two boys. Sparrow had woken, and so had Pavlos and Mikael. Old hauntings were seething back to life. Old nightmares played like broken cassettes in dark, forgotten corners. The Labyrinth was made layers and layers of terrors, the walls painted over and over with the dead's dread, the dead's fears, the dead's cowardice. Every blotted out and erased replacement laced the Labyrinth with an imprint of that worst version of them, of their terror, of their weakness. No one had gotten out of the Labyrinth in a long, long time. It was very good at what it did.

It moved, and thought, and wove its trap, a patient spider in a endless web.

* * *

After four hours, Tim threw small rocks at Jason until Jason said, voice sleep smeared and furious, “I swear to God if you don’t stop that I’ll go back and feed you to that minotaur.”

Tim had a question, but he figured that he should wait until Jason looked a little less murderous and also a little less like he’d lost a fight with a very small rodent. He waited while Jason found some breakfast, peed, and brushed his teeth.

“Hey,” he said.

Jason ignored him, munching on a thick slice of bread.

Tim said insistently, “ *Hey.”*

Jason ignored him more insistently.

Tim threw another rock at him.

Batting it aside, Jason stared at Tim with the venom of a pit viper. “Jesus Christ, I’m in hell. What.”

“The Labyrinth thing. The mythology thing. How did that story end?”

Jason thought. “Not well. For most people. Why?”

“So they never got out of the Labyrinth?” That didn’t sound right, but Tim didn’t know enough about Greek mythology to contest it.

“No, they did,” said Jason. “But there was this whole princess-abandoning thing and then the thing with the sails, and why are you asking?”

Tim stared at him. “Was any of that supposed to make sense?”

Jason heaved a sigh. Sounding heavily annoyed, he said again, “Why are you asking?”

Tim said, “Tell me the whole story.”

Jason stared at him, one eyebrow lifting critically. “Tell you the story?”

Tim challenged slyly, “Unless you don’t remember it.”

Jason’s eyes narrowed.

Tim said, "Unless you have something *better* to do."

Still scowling, Jason snapped, "Once upon a time, there was a king called Minos. He had a giant Labyrinth with a half-bull, half-human monster hidden inside it that ate people. Every year, he made the people from another kingdom sacrifice their children to the minotaur. One day, a fucker called Theseus decided that he'd had it up to his eyeballs with Minos, so he went to go defeat the minotaur. Minos' daughter Ariadne thought he was some hot shit, so she gave him a ball of twine to tie around the doorframe of the beginning of the Labyrinth so that after he'd killed the minotaur, he could find his way out again. He killed the minotaur, found his way out again, and then left Ariadne to die on an abandoned island because he sucked ass."

Tim was startled. "He left her to *die?* After she'd helped him?"

"I told you," said Jason. "It didn't, like, end great for everyone."

He wandered over to the tall door, eyeing it.

"So he just used a ball of twine," murmured Tim. "Sounds easy, but definitely won't help us here. Maybe it was less . . . sentient back then." He was vaguely disappointed. Given Silia's explanation, he'd thought maybe knowing the original myth would help.

"Well, we aren't trying to navigate it, are we?" said Jason, still examining the firmly shut door. "We're trying to get to the end of it first. Or the middle. Whatever the fuck. It's different."

Tim said, "And how come—"

Jason reached up and slammed on the golden knocker, once, twice. It echoed strangely, a much bigger sound than it should have been.

The world rumbled.

Tim was on his feet in a second, warily eyeing the door. Jason took three decisive steps backward, mouth thin.

"Why the *shit,"* said Tim, eyes sweeping over the walls and back, "would you do that?"

"Oh, yeah, how could I possibly have been so stupid as to *knock on a door,"* replied Jason.

The world stopped shaking.

The door splintered, cracked, and slowly swung open. The creaking of the hinges was deafening in the silence.

A long pause spun on until Tim ventured, “Well?”

“Dunno,” said Jason, hand on his pocket where Tim knew his gun was. “Looks like the outside, but I’m not dumb enough to buy that.”

Tendrils of fog spilled slowly into the room. Tim went over to look.

It did indeed look like the door simply opened to the outside, but like Jason, Tim was not stupid enough to believe it. The sky was murky and washed out, the color of old coffee.

As far as the eye could see, there were trees. Thick mist moved in sluggish waves around the twisted, hulking trunks, and strange birds twittered out of sight. It was impossible to tell what time it was out there.

Tim couldn’t say why, but the more he looked, the more he got the impression that everything looked just slightly . . . *wrong.* The slim, sharp needles of the trees gleamed like sewing pins. The trunks were muddy and warped, the colors smudged and tenebrous. The forest looked dark, and unapproachable, and sinister.

Jason said thinly, “After you.”

“Oh, no,” said Tim. “Absolutely not. You made me go first last time; it’s your turn to get eaten by something.”

“You didn’t get *eaten* by *anything* last time,” said Jason crossly, but he slowly stepped through the door first, gun held aloft.

His boots sank into soft soil. There was a long beat of silence, but nothing happened.

Tim followed him out. He nearly expected it when the door swung shut. For a moment, there was a door and a frame suspended alone in the forest, standing remote and still. Then it was gone.

Those out-of-sight, odd birds sang, strange and off-key. The needles zhushed against each other. There were no insects. Fog began to creep around their feet.

“So,” Jason said. “Now what?”

“Why are you asking me?” Tim stared out at the trees, trying to see if

there was anything *to* see. There was nothing but curled, jutting roots and slinking fog.

“Well, you sure love showing off how much you know all the time.” Jason, apparently satisfied that there was nothing that was immediately going to try and snap off one of his limbs, stowed his gun and examined the trees with a critical eye.

Tim rolled his eyes and didn’t engage. “Okay, well. Let’s just . . .”

“Walk?” finished Jason with knowing, contemptuous look.

Tim did not roll his eyes again, but it went against every instinct in his body. If he rolled his eyes every time Jason said something bitchy, they were going to roll right out of his head. “Yes. Just. Move.”

“Whatever you say, boygenius. Pick a direction.”

It was incredible how Jason could somehow turn ‘boygenius’ into something that sounded like something you would scrape off the bottom of your shoe. Tim picked a direction.

They walked.

As they went, it grew quiet. The birds dropped off, one by one. The breeze died. Everything became very, very still.

Tim was not a particular frequenter of forests—one didn’t run into a lot of *forests* in Gotham—but he knew they shouldn’t be this quiet. The fog was thick and unsettling, and shadows moved where they shouldn’t. The world was strangely sapped of color.

Jason stopped walking.

Before Tim could ask him why he’d stopped, he heard it, too: a soft, low swishing sound, like branches rubbing gently together.

Both of them looked around. Jason’s broad frame in front of him kept Tim from seeing too much in the forward direction, but he assumed Jason had that way covered.

Nothing but creeping fog.

Tim turned to look over his shoulder one last time, just to be sure, and —

Tim tapped at Jason’s arm once, to get his attention. He was rewarded

with an infinitesimal jump; Tim had actually startled him.

“For the love of God, Drake,” snapped Jason, whirling. “What—”

He saw it, then, and went silent immediately.

Behind them, barely visible in the fog, was a dark, slim figure, crooked like a scarecrow. Unmoving. While Tim couldn’t pick out any individual features, he got the distinct impression that it was watching them.

A quiet shiver skated up Tim’s spine. He was no stranger to being observed by something that wished him harm, but the eerie stillness of this thing gave him the creeps.

The dull glint of a pistol caught him off guard; he glanced over and hissed, “What are you *doing?”*

“What, you think that thing’s friendly?” Jason matched his low tone, aiming with practiced ease. “I’d rather not find out the hard way, if it’s all the same to you, thanks.”

“Don’t shoot,” said Tim.

Jason clenched his jaw visibly. “Why not?”

“Don’t start a fight in here unless you know you can finish it, dumbass,” said Tim thinly. “We don’t know what that is.”

Jason shot at it.

It vanished into the fog.

Tim said, “Jesus. Christ,” and threw Jason a supremely annoyed look.

“Well, that takes care of—” Jason stopped.

Tim followed his gaze.

Off to their left, nearly buried in the fog again, was the same tilted, still figure. Still watching.

“Um,” said Tim.

“That’s fucking impossible,” muttered Jason.

“Oh, I’ll just let that thing know that, shall I,” said Tim under his

breath.

The temperature dropped. Tim's fingers were cold.

"O-kay," said Tim, feeling another shiver skitter up his spine that had nothing to do with the sudden chill. "Let's . . . just . . . "

"Drake," said Jason under his breath, urgently. He was looking behind them again.

Tim swiveled his head.

Another figure, an identical one, parked behind them. The fog spilled closer, thick as milk.

Tim glanced to their right, and there was a third figure, dark and focused.

"I told you," Tim said thinly, "not to shoot."

"Oh, so this is my fault." Jason's voice was heated, but low.

"Well, you certainly didn't help."

"Listen here, you little shit—"

"Let's see what happens when we walk away," suggested Tim doubtfully.

"Sure, Drake. Whatever you say."

Jason walked forward. Tim did too. And so did all three figures, in an unnatural, loping stride.

Jason stopped, and Tim ran into his back. The figures did not stop. They were suddenly very, very close—and that was *before* Tim saw two more shapes materialize out of the fog, instantaneous and insidious.

One began to slowly reach out an arm.

Tim's heart skipped two beats, and he shoved at Jason. "What the hell!"

Jason was already moving again, striding forward. "Just thought they'd stop when we did, since they're such weird copycats."

“You’re gonna get us killed.”

“We don’t even know what they are.” But everything here was against them with a strange, personal malevolence, and Tim heard in Jason’s voice that he knew it.

Both of them picked up speed. Tim pulled out a long, flashing knife, pressing it flat against his forearm, and Jason kept his hand on his gun. Neither of them engaged.

It was a game, for a while. Every time Tim thought they had lost the figures in the fog, there they were again, gaining and then not, faster and then slower. The more Tim looked over his shoulder, the more there were. Tim gave up counting after eight and focused on not tripping over jutting roots.

The forest was hard to navigate quickly in the fog; trees and brush appeared all at once, looming and twisted, and disappeared just as quickly. Strange shapes shifted, and still the dark figures moved after them, deterred by nothing. Tim and Jason were sprinting lightly by now, but the figures kept up with them easily without any apparent change in pace. Tim still couldn’t make out what they *were,* exactly; their forms were wedges of darkness, faces shrouded in odd shadows. He just knew he didn’t want those things to catch them.

Tim was about to break into a full run when Jason stopped suddenly. Tim rammed into him, but Jason didn’t budge; it would take much, much more than Tim’s body weight to move Jason’s iron strength.

Tim hissed, startled. “Jason, what in the —”

“Deer crossing,” Jason observed, voice very flat.

“*What?”* Tim peered around Jason’s bulk.

Sure enough: there, hooves sunk in mist like water, was the largest deer Tim had ever seen. It was the size of a moose, easily, velvety fur the color of slate, antlers a gnarl of curled, hooked twists. It regarded them with cool, regal grace, unbothered by their presence. It didn’t look like it planned on moving any time soon.

Tim didn’t much fancy their odds against that thing.

“Cool,” Tim said. “Giant, flesh-ripping deer, or weird people things—”

But when he turned to see how close their pursuers were, there was

only fog, creeping along the ground in slow waves.

“Okay,” Tim said.

He kept Jason between him and the giant deer thing and thought for a second, trying to order the information that he had with the information that he wanted.

His train of thought was interrupted when a voice called, “You may as well come this way. The deer won’t attack you.”

The first thing Tim thought was that he couldn’t place the accent, which bothered him enormously. The second thing he thought was that anybody who existed in a place like this was bound to be bad news.

He peered around Jason’s shoulder again, and Jason snapped without looking at him, “Stop fucking hiding behind me, you coward.”

“It’s called strategic positioning,” Tim replied, not moving.

Jason held his gun by his side, casual-like, but Tim knew it was anything but. Jason could aim and shoot faster than a person could blink.

Jason drawled into the mist, “And why the fuck would we do that?”

Out of the fog another crooked figure appeared, but this one grew features once it got closer. His clothing was bland, with a thickly woven shawl tossed around his neck and shoulders, just about touching his cropped hair. His eyes were solemn and dark, mouth severe in a scraggly beard. He did not acknowledge the deer that stood not ten feet from him, towering above his head.

“Because,” the man said, motioning with his head in the direction of the forest, “I won’t hurt you. And they will.”

Tim said, “What are they?”

The man said, “The remnants of those that once were—lost here, even still. They’ll happily drag you into death with them.”

Tim said, “Okay. Neat. And what are you going to do?”

The man regarded him closely, eyes narrow. “Set your test before you,” he said, finally. “So that you may leave my forest. If you fail—well.” He gestured back into the fog. “They’ll have you one way or

another."

He glanced up over Tim and Jason's head, scanning the forest. "Best be off," he said, voice lower than before. "Come."

The man turned away. The deer regarded them without moving.

"So . . ." muttered Tim.

"Don't say anything. We don't have any other options," Jason reminded him flatly. "Do you want to fight some fucking shadows?"

"Fine."

They followed after the man, who was by now nearly lost in the fog despite the fact that he couldn't have been more than ten paces away.

"So the test is how we . . . oh. Okay. The deer is following us. That's fine," said Tim.

Jason swiveled, expression intense, and looked over Tim's head.

The great deer was ambling slowly after them, its massive antlers brushing against the still leaves and scraping against dull trunks. The sound of its hooves hitting the ground solidified just how large it was.

"Come," said the man again, from ahead of them.

"So," said Jason under his breath.

"We definitely shouldn't do this," agreed Tim.

They followed the man into the mist, and the mammoth deer followed them.

They walked through the woods, and as they walked, the fog receded somewhat. Trees became trees instead of shapeless, looming shadows, and things improved significantly without strange faceless figures after them.

Tim said to the man's back, "So. What is this place?"

"Oh my God," muttered Jason.

The man turned briefly to throw Tim an unreadable glance, but he did answer. "Besides hell, you mean. It's a prison."

“For Markos and Rhea.”

It took a moment for the man to respond, and when he did, his voice was hard. “Yes. Them. And for every other unfortunate who manages to find themselves inside it.”

“We already *know* this, Drake.” Jason’s voice was derisive, exasperated.

Tim was not deterred. “Who made it? How does it run?”

“The gods. Or beings like gods. As for how it is run, that I could not tell you. It only is, and it only does. A mind of its own, bigger than the rest of us. And it’s cunning. Wicked. Fickle, too.”

Tim digested this. “Why are Markos and Rhea inside it?”

The man glanced back again. “Strange questions to be asking,” he murmured, nearly to himself. Louder, he said, “I only know part of the tale. Once Rhea and Markos were beloved of the gods, or just the one, if you go in for that. But they betrayed their people—their countrymen. They smuggled in enemy soldiers through their lands. Instigated a massacre of the kingdom. Traitors, the worst kind. They lived in prosperity in return for it, for a time . . . but the favors the gods had granted them turned to punishments, and they were placed here, to suffer for all eternity. The race every seven years is just . . . entertainment. For the gods, for the Labyrinth. Who knows. There was a child, too,” he added, squinting off into the mist to his left. Tim did, too, just in case, but there was nothing. “That was the first race, I understood . . . the race to find their child.”

Tim felt a little sick. “What happened to the child?”

“What happens to everyone here,” he answered. “She was swallowed.”

Jason made an appalled sound that he stifled halfway through making it.

Tim muscled down his revulsion. “So what are you doing here, then?”

Without looking back, the man said, “I was the first to die in this forest.”

Tim’s spine prickled. Jason threw Tim a slightly hectic glance.

Without stopping to consider which direction a conversation should

take after one party has admitted that they're dead, Tim said, "Why didn't you, like, move on, or whatever? Why are you still here?"

Jason made a little hissing noise that was remarkably reminiscent of Damian. Tim didn't look at him. He needed to know. He wanted to know how being dead wasn't a get-out-of-jail-free card for this place.

The man shrugged, spread his hands, once again without looking over his shoulder. "Take your pick. Penance for old crimes. Revenge. Some of us can't find the way out, even in death, like these lost shadows in the trees." He flapped a hand to indicate the strange forms that had followed them. "Some go on. Except Silia," he added, voice darkening. "Now, that. That is a piece of work you should hope never looks your way."

Jason and Tim flashed each other a quick look. Tim bit his tongue, and didn't say anything.

The ground swelled up in front of them. At the top was a cabin, colorless and flat.

The man held the door for them. Jason made vicious eye contact with the man as he went through, a rattlesnake snapping its tail, but Tim was too busy peering into the interior to look at the man.

It was simple. Bare. Ashes stirred in the fireplace in an unseen breeze. There was no furniture other than three chairs, arranged far apart, but all facing each other.

Tim glanced out one of the two windows. The deer stood beside the house, facing away from them. It was too big to see in its entirety through the window.

Tim said, "So."

The man took a seat in one of the chairs and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Sit," he said.

"No," said Jason.

A second later, Tim was in one of the chairs with no memory of sitting, and Jason was across from him. From the incensed look on Jason's face, Tim wasn't the only one who had been moved without his permission.

"It was not," the man said, "a request."

He looked over at Tim. A furrow appeared between his brows.

“You’re very young,” he said. “Too young to be here. This place is for the worst of the lot.”

Tim said, “Is that what you are? The worst of the lot?”

The man tipped his head. “What I was. And yes,” he said, unflinchingly.

Jason said, “So what now? You kill us and feed our bodies to that giant deer out there?”

He sounded very derisive, Tim thought, for someone who had just suggested something that was entirely possible.

The man gave a huff that could possibly have passed for amusement. “No. You’ll need that deer.”

He tossed something to Tim so quickly that Tim unthinkingly snatched it out of the air, immediately compensating for the unexpected weight of it.

It was a pockmarked stone disc, heavy and flat. Stamped into one side was an image of the deer outside, horns a great tangled mess. Tim flipped it over, testing its heft, and looked up. “And what am I supposed to do with this?”

“There’s a lake half a mile from here,” the man replied, pointing. “That way. Take it there. There’s a pedestal that disc needs to be returned to.”

Tim blinked. Jason lifted one razor-sharp eyebrow.

“And that’s . . . it,” Tim said.

“What, is he going to ride the deer there? He’s too short to get on it,” Jason observed. Tim glared at him.

“No,” the man said, not acknowledging Jason’s barb. “Do not touch the deer. It will follow you no matter what.”

“Why?”

“In case,” the man said, “you have need of it.”

Tim squinted. “This seems too easy.”

“Would you shut up and—” Jason started to say, shifting forward. He frowned. Shifted again. His features darkened with rage, and he rounded on the man. “Why can’t I *move?”*

Tim tried standing up, which worked fine for him. “Maybe you’re just a pussy,” he suggested to Jason, who made a lunging motion for Tim but was stopped by the fact that his butt, apparently, was glued to his seat.

Tim smirked at Jason when he was sure that Jason was watching.

“I’m actually going to kill you,” Jason told him venomously.

Tim flipped the disc, which was a little difficult given its weight, but he managed to make it look effortless. “So. Pedestal. Lake. Does the deer thing kill me once my back is turned? What’s the catch here?”

“The deer will not hurt you,” the man said, voice flat and inflectionless.

Tim said again, “What’s the catch.”

“You put the disc in the pedestal, and then you may leave my forest unharmed,” the man replied.

Tim gestured to Jason and said, “Him, too, right? I’m not leaving without him.”

Jason forgot to look vicious in favor of looking a bit startled.

“You may both leave once the disc is in the pedestal,” the man agreed.

The wording still sounded off to Tim, but he couldn’t think of any other way to word his questions. “And you won’t hurt us,” he checked again.

“No. I will not hurt you,” said the man. He gestured to Jason. “He will be released as soon as the disc is in the pedestal.”

“Right,” said Tim.

He and Jason exchanged a doubtful look before instantly looking away from each other. They were thinking the same thing, but they were not at stage in their relationship when they wanted to be agreeing on anything.

Tim glanced outside. The fog rolled. The deer eyed him coolly. Silence

lay steadily.

“Okay,” he said.

Without looking at Jason again, he left the cabin, leaving the door swinging open behind him. The cabin, its two windows looking eerily like a pair of eyes, watched him go.

The great footfalls of the deer began to sound behind him. He headed down the rise, back into the trees.

It was deathly quiet, and Tim didn’t make any noise himself, softening his footfalls. He looked around constantly, half-waiting for the shadows to materialize to make a chase again, but nothing appeared. The deer followed him fixedly.

He glanced back at the deer often, and kept close to trees. The only way he was going to avoid that deer if it decided to gore him with those fantastical horns was shimmying up the nearest tree, but it didn’t charge him. It plodded along after him, and didn’t appear to change moods in the slightest.

He could smell the lake after a while: the scent of algae, and murky water. The air became damp and stagnant.

You’ll need that deer.

For *what?* He wasn’t planning on taking days to walk a single measly half-mile, or doing anything else for a extended period of time that would require him to kill the deer for food eventually. In any case—

Damn. He stopped dead in place, wanting to smack himself. The *time.* He hadn’t asked how long the task would take. For all he knew, it was the lake the size of Lake Superior, and it would take him weeks and weeks to walk around it to find the pedestal. Jason would be dead of starvation by then. *Or,* worse, there was a secret time *limit* that he hadn’t thought to ask about. Maybe the man would kill Jason after thirty minutes. Or four. Jason could already be dead. He could already be a shadow—

Focus.

He shook himself and strode forward. There was no use in waffling around now. He would get it done and see what happened after that.

His heart skittered inside of him, kicking him a little in its anxiety. He

kicked it back and settled it with purposeful, slow breaths.

He walked. The trees thinned. The lake appeared all at once.

It was as green and murky as the not-sky, algae choking the edges, huge fronds floating tranquilly on top. The smell was much stronger: a damp, fishy smell, the smell of rotting plantlife and dead waterlife.

The good news was that it was not the size of Lake Superior; he could see the other side of it. If he needed to, he could probably walk all the way around it within a day.

The bad news was that he could see the pedestal, and it was sticking out of the lake.

* * *

He paced the shore for a while, took a break to eat. The deer stood on the grass beside him, unperturbed by anything that was happening.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tim saw a figure: dark and tilting.

When he snapped his head around to see it properly, there was nothing there.

Ignoring the way the hair on his arms was raised, he gazed at the lake. There was something in it. There had to be. He'd waltzed up to the edge of it, and there was no way he'd just be able to swim over to the pedestal.

That, and the fact that this lake had no gradual deepening, no rocky bed that slowly vanished into the murk. The water did not lap at the shore the way normal lakes did. When Tim stuck an experimental leg into the edge of the water, where it should have been very shallow still, his leg sank up to his knee without touching the bottom. He dropped a stone in, and it sank without a ripple.

There was the forest, and then there was the lake. There was no in between. It could be bottomless for all he knew.

He glanced at the deer, who was staring straight off into the distance, and promptly abandoned any half-formed thought he had of riding it while it swam. Unfortunately Jason was right: he was too short to even think about getting astride it. The only comforting part about that thought was that even though Jason was nearly a head taller than him, Jason couldn't have ridden it, either.

He heaved a long sigh.

There was nothing for it. He'd just have to do it and see what happened.

"Well," he said to the deer, "Here goes nothing."

He stripped off his jacket, and his shoes and socks. He left two knives strapped to his waist. The disc was jammed securely in his pocket.

When he dropped into the water, his feet didn't touch bottom. He doggy paddled for a minute, sloshing around purposefully to disturb anything in it. The water was like tepid bathwater. It rippled away from him uneasily.

"Okay, if anything in this big very scary lake wants to eat me, now would be the time," he announced.

Nothing answered.

The leaves whispered against each other. The water lapped at his ears, but nothing jumped out with big long teeth.

Nothing for it. He began to swim, a clean, swift freestyle.

He wasn't going to think about how deep the water was, or how anything could be in it underneath him. He was going to keep swimming, and then he was going to put the disc in the pedestal, and then he was going to swim right back, and nothing was going to go wrong.

Tim was a quick swimmer, and it was about forty feet to the pedestal. He was ten feet out when there was a large splash behind him.

He twisted around in the water, treading.

The deer had plunged into the water after him, and it was treading water now, watching him. It made no move to get closer; he supposed that it stayed a distance away from him on purpose. The waves from its entrance into the lake buffeted Tim gently.

Tim stayed in one place to make sure the deer wouldn't get closer to him. It didn't.

He began swimming again, swift and sure. Nothing came to get him.

Still, his stomach twisted in anticipation. Something was going to

happen soon. He just wasn't sure what.

He made it twent-five out of the forty feet before something touched his foot.

He jerked instantly, stopping his forward motion before shaking himself and continuing, faster than before. If there was something in there, then he needed to—

Between one instant and the next, something icy cold and slimy slipped up around his ankle and yanked him beneath the water, horrid and fishlike against the skin of his bare foot.

Tim let out a stream of bubbles in surprise before he caught himself, trapping the air in his chest; he was going to need to ration that.

The water was as green and murky as the air above him. He curled in on himself as whatever-it-was dragged him down and slashed at the thing that had his leg, a deep and decisive cut.

A cloud of black inked the water, and the slimy thing disappeared.

Tim had just begun to swim to the surface when two more things slithered up and wrapped around his legs, yanking him back down again. The water grew noticeably colder as the surface dwindled further and further away, twinkling innocently down at him. Tim let out another thin, quick stream of bubbles.

He slashed at what was holding his leg—which was for sure a *tentacle* — but this time, when the black clouded the water, it didn't let go. More tentacles began slithering up through the inky water, the grisly pink of raw meat.

His chest was getting uncomfortably tight.

A wave buffeted him, and the water swirled, black strands twisting away from him. Tim yanked and swam, but the tentacle held him fast.

Out of the tendrils of black water, a head jutted forward.

Tim let out another small stream of bubbles.

It was enormous, with six eyes all fixed on the front of its face, gazing serenely at Tim. They all blinked unevenly, ghoulishly yellow, overlapping green-white scales flapping in the water currents. It was

so beautiful it was ugly. It was so ugly it was beautiful. It unhinged its jaw, and rows and rows of needle-like teeth unhooked from the roof of its mouth.

Tim twisted again and sawed at the tentacle holding him—quick, vicious back and forth strokes. The head drifted closer, unconcerned, mouth open wide, big enough to simply swallow him upright and whole. Tim let the last bit of air out of his nose.

Tim sawed the end of the tentacle clean off. He swam towards the surface. His chest was killing him, and his jaw hurt from clenching it tight enough to keep from inhaling water.

Another whole, unbroken tentacle slithered around his ankle, and the surface grew farther away.

Tim could have screamed in frustration if he'd had the oxygen to do it.

He cut viciously at the tentacle again, urgency making his movements less accurate, clumsy. He needed to stay calm. He needed *air*.

The tentacle was reaching for him again, but slower. Tim swam up.

Just when Tim thought that he was going to have to inhale anyway, because his chest was caving in on itself with want—

His head broke the surface, and he choked with how fast he inhaled, then choked again on the next inhale. The third one broke through, and in between coughing, Tim breathed.

He got exactly two more lungfuls of air before he was dragged under again.

Tim sawed off another tentacle, swimming backwards. He couldn't decide if the shore was the best bet, or—

Another tentacle slithered toward him. Tim readied his knife.

And then it retreated. Moved away from him, in a way that suggested that it had an idea of where it wanted to be instead.

Through the clouds of black, eddies of water swirled. Something big was happening, something big was moving—

And then Tim saw it: the tentacles, closing around the enormous body of the deer, pulling it beneath the surface. The deer did not struggle.

The head emerged through the clouds of black ink. The jaw unhinged. Rows of needle teeth gleamed. The jaw's circumference was large enough that its first bite would be substantial. It drifted coolly up to meet the deer.

Tim whipped around and swam as fast as he could.

When he burst out of the water, he didn't look behind him. He made it to the pedestal. Scrambled onto it, slipping a little with his bare wet feet. He slammed the disc into the indentation.

Nothing happened, but then, Tim didn't know what he'd been expecting.

He turned.

The water churned. Red clouds mixed with the froth of the bubbles, turning the surface of the water pink. He stared, transfixed with horror.

After too long of a moment, he shook his head viciously. He didn't have time for this. He didn't have any time at all. He knew why he needed the deer now, but he didn't know if it would buy him another forty feet.

He dove into the water.

It was black, and red. He tried to avoid the worst of the sea monster, but he needed to get back to the shore as quickly as possible.

He looked down into the water, and he got a better idea of the scope of the creature he was dealing with.

It didn't end. Tim's brain could barely comprehend what it was seeing.

Its colossal head was attached to a colossal, thick body, with two arms that ended in five wicked claws each—the only reason it seemed not to have used them to end Tim's life instantly was because the tentacles had a better reach. The claws were the size of Tim's entire body. Its trunk-like body then continued until, reminiscent of a massive squid, it simply dissolved into tentacles. It filled Tim's eyesight.

It was finishing off the deer, messily. Grisly bits of fur and bone were drifting through the water around it.

Tim swam.

He was maybe fifteen feet from the shore when a tentacle snagged him.

It pulled him swiftly down through the water.

There was the head. Bits of the deer still clung to its teeth.

Tim twisted and swam towards the head this time—the tentacle went slack—probably everything it grabbed was trying to swim away, and Tim had caught it by surprise. He brandished his knife, and stabbed it far into one of its six eyes.

The remainder of its eyes slitted instantly, turning poisonous yellow, and it jerked its head, nearly throwing Tim off. Instantly, a forest of tentacles began swarming him, suckers opening and closing in an ugly series of tiny pops. A huge, colossal sound gurgled from its throat; Tim winced as it dug into his eardrums.

He wriggled, braced himself on the slick scales as best he could, and stabbed the eye above it.

It made the huge sound again, and this time, when its head snapped from side to side, Tim was tossed away into the water.

The head was no longer wasting time. It twisted toward Tim, opened its mouth as wide as he was tall again, and lunged through the water.

Somehow, it was the tentacles that were Tim's saving grace. He swam up, grabbed one, and hung on as it jerked itself out of the path of that mouth.

In an instant, it had turned on him, slithering around his arm and then his chest like a snake. More tentacles joined, coiling around him.

He sliced them with his knife, but he was wary of doing this now; the more the water became clouded with the black ink, the less he knew where that head was.

But the tentacles coiled tighter, and Tim made a quick, panicked choice: if it was between not being able to see the head and getting suffocated underwater by the back half of a squid, he was gonna choose not being able to see the head.

The water darkened until Tim couldn't tell which way was up.

He'd let out all his air, and his lungs were burning.

He swam a few feet. Tentacles snatched him back. He cut. Black ink spilled out. The water became as dark as night.

The white, slick head loomed through the black, and Tim swam with all his might. The head vanished underneath him. The tentacles came back.

His movements were slowing down. The urgency was draining out of him, and it was getting harder to keep his mouth closed. Air was all he could think about, but he had no idea which direction the surface was.

A wave rippled through the lake, visibly shifting all the water, quick and booming.

Black was closing in on Tim's vision, and it wasn't just the ink.

Another tentacle closed around his leg, and it dragged him down.

His numb fingers weren't holding a knife anymore.

A ghostly face floated up into his darkening vision: the visage of the man who had sent him on the quest, pouring vapor.

Tim's mouth unhinged, and his muscles slacked; water rushed into his mouth and nose.

He stopped being aware of his body. He stopped being aware of his fear. His eyes slid closed.

The next thing he felt was a viciously prickly, stabbing pain in his chest, because he was coughing up water and trying to breathe at the same time.

Something shoved him onto his side, and Tim continued hacking up water and trying to breathe simultaneously, with varying amounts of success. Every time he tried to breathe, something sharp and heavy slammed into his back, and more water came through his nose and his mouth, burning his esophagus and his nostrils.

When what had to be all of the water in his entire body had been expelled out through his face, the thing stopped hitting him, and Tim sagged, gasping for breath. Shivers began to wrack his entire body. Water lapped at his feet.

There was a hand braced on his shoulder, keeping him on his side. The owner of said hand observed, weary admiration threading through his annoyance, “Holy fuck, Timmers. That is one hell of a way to piss off a sea monster.”

Chapter 4

Jason let him have about four minutes to try and remember what it was like to have lungs before he was prodding Tim to get to his feet, shoving at his shoulder.

Tim did not open his eyes. Through his ruined throat, croaked out incredulously, “Can you give a guy a minute? I drowned.”

“You only half-drowned,” Jason informed him. “Barely any water in there. Come on, Timbo, you sorry excuse for a Robin. Move it.”

Tim told Jason precisely and exactly the ways in which he could get fucked, rolled onto his stomach, and laboriously pulled himself to his feet.

Jason shoved at him. “Come on. Move. Those tentacles were long as shit, and I ain’t going back in for you a second time.”

Tim shuddered. The thought of those puckered, slimy tentacles reaching up through the water to the shore to drag him back in had him hustling away from the water’s edge as fast as his cold, tired body would allow. He snatched his jacket and shoes up as he went.

He glanced back before they entered the trees again, just once.

There was not a pedestal in sight. The lake twinkled gently, looking bluer and cleaner than when he had been inside it not ten minutes ago. Nothing made so much as a ripple.

He shuddered. “Hang on. I need to put my shoes back on.”

Jason stopped moving, scanning the forest. His black hair was plastered against his skull. He was sopping wet—and fully and completely clothed. Which meant that he had dived into the lake without preparation or thought.

Tim struggled with his shoes. He said, “Why—how did you know I was in trouble?”

Jason glanced at him, and then away just as quickly. “The chair let me go and a door appeared next to me. Guy said I could go. When I asked where you were, he didn’t say anything. Figured something had happened. Not a difficult leap.”

“So you, what. Ran down here?”

Jason’s next quick glance was irritated. “Yes, dipshit. Are you going to thank me now? Because you’re only alive because I ran.”

Even if Jason had started the second Tim had slammed the disc into the pedestal, it would have meant that he’d covered the entire distance in a matter of minutes. He hadn’t just been running—he would’ve been *hauling ass.*

Tim said, “Whatever.”

“Come on,” said Jason.

Tim did.

They trekked back to the cabin. When Jason threw the door open, the inside of the cabin was not there. It opened up into—

“Another . . . forest,” Tim said, doubtfully.

“Whatever,” said Jason, in a way that conveyed how done he was with the entire situation. He didn’t pause before walking through it.

Tim followed him.

At least it was a different forest. There was less fog, and Tim could tell that night was falling. The sky had more color. The trees were different.

When Tim looked over his shoulder for the doorway, there was nothing but more trees.

Jason stopped them not too long afterward to change out of their wet things. Tim was shivering hard enough that closing his numb hands around his clothes was difficult, but he managed it after two or three tries. To be fair, he did feel a lot better after he was in dry clothes.

Jason observed, “Let’s just leave the wet stuff. It’ll just make the rest of our clothes wet and smell weird.”

Tim said, “Who cares?”

Jason said, “Jesus Christ. Were you raised in a *barn?* Leave the wet clothes.”

Tim was too tired to argue, and he sort of did see the point of not

making the rest of their clothes lakewater-y.

They trekked for fifteen minutes before Jason said, “All right. Let’s make camp.”

“What?” Tim protested halfheartedly.

“I want to sleep before something else tries to eat us,” Jason said. “And you’re going slower by the second. I’ll take first watch.”

Tim was about to point out in a whiny, irritated sort of way that he was *not* going any slower, thank you very much, when he realized that Jason’s brisk, offhand manor was very different from the last time they’d made camp, and that Jason kept glancing at him without actually meeting his eyes.

And Tim was very tired.

“Yeah,” he said after a long minute. “Okay.”

Tim went out to grab kindling, and Jason shoved some rocks in a circle in preparation for a contained fire. Tim wordlessly made a sizeable pile of branches next to Jason, and by the time Tim had set out his bedroll and guzzled some water, Jason had a neat, steady fire going.

Tim sighed as he laid down, staring up at the muddy, dreary sky.

“Hey,” said Tim reluctantly, dragging his eyes open.

Jason turned to face him from the other side of the campfire; he’d been staring off into the forest. The firelight flickered over his scratched face, giving his expression odd shadows.

“Thanks,” he said.

Jason’s expression didn’t change, but Tim thought that his eyes looked less angry than they usually did. “Told you I fucking wouldn’t leave you to die. Hey.”

Tim opened his eyes again and glanced over at him.

After a long second, Jason checked, “You good?”

Tim closed his eyes again. He was tired, and cold, and his feet felt like they’d had suction cups ripped off them, and he kind of really wanted to be in his own bed.

“Yeah,” he said.

The sky darkened more. Shadows lengthened.

Sleep didn’t come. It was one of those nights, where even when Tim felt like he could sleep for weeks, the realm of the unconscious was as slippery as a soap bar. The fire warmed his cold skin, though, and he relaxed a little more, brain whirring.

Jason had saved his life.

It felt like a glimpse of that other side of Jason, the one that never came out around Tim.

Tim’s feelings for the wayward Wayne had become more complicated in the past few years, and it had always nettled him, because he wanted to be able to hate his would-be killer in peace. Tim was always doing surveillance, and sometimes, out of curiosity, he’d go digging after Red Hood— and it was never what he was expecting. There was violence, there was a meticulous kind of ruthlessness, but there was method, a means to an end, always: evidence that Jason had stopped another ugly gang war, that he’d chased more crime ring recruiters from high schools, that the local drug lords had been banned from pulling children in to be their drug runners, that another child trafficker had been stopped for good. He was always somewhere watching Nightwing’s back, and now the current Robin’s. The Red Hood was dangerous, but not to innocents.

Tim had begun to suspect, against his better judgment and to his endless bitter annoyance, that the cruel, uncaring facade that Jason presented to the world was just that—a facade. It made sense, maybe, but Tim had never seen it in person—until one day nearly a year ago, in Wayne Manor in the weary depths of the night.

It had been while Bruce had been out of Gotham on a League mission. Dick had come back to the Manor after a long night of patrolling instead of to his own apartment. Tim had been in the hallway, having showered after his own patrol, and he’d gone downstairs to see what the noise was.

No one had heard him creep silently down to the kitchen. The lights had cut on, and Tim had watched Dick lean heavily against the counter, also freshly showered, clothes loose and comfortable.

He had looked exhausted and troubled and world-worn, body curled—like he was carrying something too heavy. His eyes stared off into

nothing, forehead creased.

Tim had opened his mouth to say something gentle and quipping to pull Dick out of his own head when another voice had said, “Hey, Dickiebird. Something on your mind?”

Dick had looked up, and something gentle and glad had softened his mouth. “Jay. Thanks for tonight.”

“Mm. We watch each other’s backs, huh?” A pause. Jason had come into view a moment later, armed to the teeth, all Red Hood except for the missing helmet and the disheveled hair.

Jason had reached forward and put his hand against the place where Dick’s hair met his sweatshirt. He had said, in a voice Tim had never heard before, “What’s wrong. Hey. What’s up?”

Dick had exhaled, and his frame had crumpled inward, like the air had gone out of all of him.

“Oh,” he said, voice awful and subdued, “You know.”

Without saying a word, Jason had pulled Dick in so that one hand was against Dick’s neck, the other around his back, more or less supporting all of Dick’s weight. Dick laid his head against Jason’s shoulder and shuddered, a full-body ripple that Tim had been able to see from his position at the door. Jason leaned his own head on top of Dick’s. Neither of them had moved for a very long time.

Tim had crept away. Hours later, after he had slept, he had carefully snuck back downstairs, unsure of who was still about.

Alfred had his back to Tim, making breakfast. Jason had been sitting against the kitchen island, munching casually on a muffin as he scrolled through his phone. Muffin and phone were balanced precariously in one hand, because his other arm was around Dick. Dick had been keeled sideways against Jason in the unselfconscious slumber of the exhausted, covered in a blanket, mouth parted in sleep.

Tim had always known that Jason was a totally different person around Dick and Damian and Alfred and a lot of other people than he was around Tim. Tim had had to accept that, because he’d had to find a reason for Dick and Alfred and Bruce’s continual defense of Jason. He’d had to find a reason so he could forgive them a little for associating with and even loving a person who had once nearly murdered Tim.

It was just that after that day, he had discovered that he was very bitter about it.

Tim had not gone into the kitchen that morning, because if he'd done that, Jason would have turned into the acerbic, cruel version of himself that he always was around Tim. It was just that this time, that had seemed like a terrible thing.

Tim sighed and rolled over and tried to sleep again.

"Hey," he said, finally, when he got tired of listening to his spinning thoughts.

Jason responded immediately. "Jesus. I thought you were sleeping. What."

The fire crackled. Tim opened his eyes and found Jason meticulously feeding it, poking it into a better shape. The burnt wood at the bottom rippled, and white ash drifted into the air.

"The minotaur story. How'd you know that?"

Jason's said patiently, "I know this is very difficult for a rich kid like you to grasp, but I can actually read."

Tim brushed aside the insult in favor of sating his ever-present curiosity. He'd remembered something, while he'd been in the forest. While his body fought for his survival, his mind had been digging around for possible answers to the question. "Yeah, but like. Does that mean you read them all?"

"Read all of what?"

Tim said it without thinking. "All the books in your room."

The fire snapped. Jason stared at him, and his face turned cold without moving.

Tim stared back. He stood by his question, even if he did think that Jason probably regretted not letting him drown at this point. He added, somewhat unnecessarily, "There were Greek myths in there. I saw it."

"What the hell were you doing in my old room?" Jason's eyes were chips of blue ice. There wasn't any of the slow, sneering contempt that was usually present in his voice—his words were curt and fast,

chewed and snapped out quickly. Tim couldn't tell if he was surprised or furious.

"It was when I first moved into the Manor." He didn't add *when you were dead,* but it was implied. "I was exploring. Bruce caught me in there the second time I went in there. I wasn't allowed after that."

Jason stabbed viciously at the fire once, twice.

Tim stared up into the night—because it was night. The sky had darkened to the color of dull black coffee, and the shadows had deepened and lengthened until only their small crackling fire kept them at bay. No stars, of course.

Tim was finally drifting off when Jason said, "Are all my books still there?"

"Mm? Oh. Yeah. I mean, nothing's different." And because he was tired and half-asleep, he added, shifting slightly, "Bruce is the only one who goes in there. Haven't you been back?"

"No," said Jason, low. "Why does B go in there?"

What was the harm in telling the truth, anyway. "Used to all the time, before. Less now that you're back." Bruce had used to hole himself up there when it was Jason's birthday. The anniversary of his death. When photos of Jason had been splashed all over the news after some new building, memorial, library had been named after him. When Tim had caught Bruce looking at the walls of photos of himself and Jason and Dick, and then Bruce would disappear again, and Tim would know exactly where he'd gone.

Jason didn't say anything else, and Tim finally found sleep.

* * *

After Tim's breathing had evened out and he hadn't said anything in a long time, Jason scrubbed a hand over his face and went back to parsing out his own thoughts.

Every time Jason thought that he had gotten some sort of scope on how fucked up this place was, it proved him wrong.

After he had been freed from being glued to a chair and before he had put together that Tim was probably getting murdered, an open doorway had appeared in the cabin. It hadn't led to another forest, the

way the one after the lake had. It had led to a tunnel flickering with lantern-light. Jason wondered at where that would have taken him only briefly, because then he had figured out what the Labyrinth was tempting him to do, and alarm bells had started blaring in his head. He hadn't run that fast in a long time.

Jesus fuck.

His ass was getting stiff, so he got up and snapped off some of the cold, rough branches for more firewood, always staying within sight of the circle of light, then paced back and forth. After an hour or so, he sat back down again.

His room was still the same. All his books. Ugh, those *books.* First editions, most of them. It had been a game between he and Alfred and Bruce: who could find the most first editions.

Bruce had been winning, he remembered suddenly. He'd found a first edition of *The Hobbit,* and that had put him ahead by one. It had been a birthday gift for Jason.

Motherfucker.

He wanted to go out and fight somebody. He wanted to call Dick, annoy him until he felt human and normal again. He wanted to jump on his bike and let the wind slash away the memories he couldn't chase down.

Somewhere, something hooted like an owl, gentle and familiar.

Jason squinted around at the forest. If he hadn't known better, he would have said that there was something—different about the forest. Like without him noticing, it had become a typical, ordinary place.

That wasn't it. It *sounded* more like a normal forest. Instead of the eerie whisperings of things just out of sight, and the shrieking of horrifying birds, there was just the rustling, sleepy sounds of a normal group of trees: the wind rustling the pine needles against each other, the gentle cooing of night owls, the sound of small animals scurrying through the underbrush. As he listened, crickets began to chirp, as though summoned by his thoughts.

He flipped his knife over and over in his hand, and then he flung it at a tree. It stuck there, quivering. He retrieved it and went back to the fire and flung it again, and again, and again.

In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.

* * *

The Labyrinth was puzzled. The Labyrinth had never had this happen before.

Silia had peered in to see Mikael try to kill the boys with his sea monster, and when that had failed, she had gone back to taunting Rhea. The Labyrinth, however, kept thinking in its slow, otherworldly way. It kept looking. But it looked in vain: Mikael was now gone. Mikael had come to watch Tim's death, the way he always came to watch the deaths of those who drowned in his lake, and then Tim had not drowned.

Jason Todd had saved Tim Drake's life. He had not taken the road that the Labyrinth had offered him.

This had never happened—never. The Labyrinth often helped people cheat in one way or another. It always required the sacrifice of something else. And nobody had ever hesitated before. Not once.

And Jason Todd had not hesitated to *refuse* it.

Because something had happened inside the Labyrinth that had never happened before, something was happening *to* the Labyrinth that had never happened before.

The Labyrinth was layered with the actions of its occupants, like any place inhabited by the living. The greed. The terror. The malevolence. It had never experienced an act of selflessness before.

If the other spirits had been watching, they would have seen that instead of adding a layer, the action of Jason Todd had taken *off* a layer.

The lake with the pedestal had only fish in it now. The forest, twisted and chained to its original death, became something like what it had once been. The shadowed ghosts that had wandered there for so long found their way out, and on.

The spirit that had warped it so completely was no longer there.

Nobody noticed.

In the very heart of the Labyrinth, one of its viciously twisted

heartstrings slowly straightened out again.

* * *

Tim took his watch. After that they had a small breakfast and a gulp of water, which was not enough to feed either of them fully, but one does as one must—and trekked onward.

The forest was definitely different than the other one. Tim did not hear any more creepy birds, or see any alarming apparitions. There still weren't any living animals, or any evidence of real forest life, but at least nothing was hunting them.

About an hour later, they came to the hedge walls.

"This feels like some fancy fuckin . . . Versailles shit, or something," said Jason, stuffing his hands into his jacket pockets. He glared up at the wall of tightly wound plants, which towered over his head at least twenty feet high. "I mean, what the goddamn hell do they want us to do?"

"Do you think it's one of those hedge mazes?"

"A maze within a maze?" Jason's mouth curled in contempt. "Hilarious. I'm dying laughing."

They found the opening not too long after that. It was, clearly, a maze within a maze. A tall white statue of a woman in flowing robes of marble reached down to them, her fingers loosely curled around a sightless white serpent.

But Tim Drake had never been good at following directions. And he was even less inclined to listen to authority figures when he didn't have all the whys, or the whats. He didn't care that this was some damn giant alien thing eating them. He wasn't doing it.

He said curtly, "I'm not going in there. I'm not messing with these shitty tests or rules. The Labyrinth can go to hell. I want to see what happens, what it does."

Out of the corner of Tim's eye, he saw one of Jason's eyebrows tick up slightly, giving away that he was, against his better judgement, impressed by the ballsiness of this suggestion. All he said, though, was, "Whatever. Pick a direction. "

Tim picked a direction.

Fifteen minutes later, they were in front of the opening in the maze with the same statue, despite having walked in more or less straight line. Her slight marbled smile seemed to mock them.

"I think," said Jason, with casual glee, "This is sort of a mandatory test thing, Drake. As much as I love wandering around pointlessly, I think we should maybe just get it over with."

Tim scowled at him. Jason blinked innocently, then wandered into the hedge maze, glancing in both directions

"So," said Jason. "Beat this and then . . . what. Another door?"

Tim ground his teeth. "These are just tests of strength and agility. This isn't even overly difficult. What's the point?"

Jason turned around to stare at him incredulously. "The *point?* There doesn't need to be a point. This is a fucking insane alien alternate dimension, and *the point* is to win and go home, Drake. You want this to be *harder?* Don't say that too loud, shithole. It'll fucking hear you."

"It can't *hear us,"* Tim muttered, with more certainty in his voice than in his heart.

Jason said, exasperated, impatient: "For crying out loud, Drake. Come *on."*

It was Jason's turn to pick a direction: left they went. The way was narrower than Tim would have liked. The hedge walls seemed to tilt over him, threatening to close in. Jason's broad shoulders seemed especially big; if he had reached out both arms, he could have touched both sides of the hedge maze.

Nothing happened, for a while. They took turns choosing directions. Jason thought they should be trying to go for the center, while Tim wasn't so sure about that course of action—but he simply didn't have a better idea.

It made his blood boil, not having any resources, not being able to plan. Made his blood boil and his heart shrink back. He hadn't been this defenseless for a long time.

The hedges were so tall that they cast dark shadows over the path, blotting out whatever daylight was out there. Tim began to feel somewhere in his spine that they were being watched.

After that, it didn't take too long for the sounds to start. Crying in the distance. Wind whistled sharply through the hedges. Indistinguishable voices spoke from somewhere behind the hedges. Heavy footfalls sounded sometimes just around corners. Unknown *things* skittered away from them into the shadows.

Restless, barely sated hunger began to gnaw at Tim's stomach. Jason kept a hand in his pocket, curled around his gun.

They came to a crossroads: there was a left branch, and there was a straight path.

Jason started to say, "Whose turn is it to—"

From the darkness in the fork down to the left, there came a cry. It was clearer and louder than the other far-flung voices, so when it began to speak, they heard every word, strained and afraid.

"I cannot hold them—this is—Father! Timothy! *Jason, help me!"*

Tim was three steps forward, automatic and frantic, when something snagged his jacket, dragging him back.

He started to snarl, "Let me go—" before he stopped, his brain catching up with him. His insides lurched with dull horror. Jason's mouth was twisted, eyes on the darkened path where the voice had come from.

His brain grabbed for logic—Damian would never use their real names in a combat situation, it just wouldn't—

" *Timothy!"* Damian's voice was awful, and instantly, Tim stopped thinking. Damian was dying, something was killing him, and he was —

Feeling Tim pulling against his grip, Jason snapped out, "He's not here —he's with B. He's not here. He's not."

" *No! HELP ME!"*

Jason closed his eyes, fist tightening on Tim's collar. He was breathing very fast. "If we go down there we'll die. If we go down there, we'll die, because if I was a horrible, evil Labyrinth, I would use a kid brother's voice to lure people into traps. He's not here."

Damian screamed. Both of them flinched.

“God,” Tim burst out. “God, I hate this. Let’s—”

Damian was crying, now. Tim had to run away, now, because if he didn’t, he was going to run down that fork and—

Not Damian. It’s not Damian. It’s not, it’s not, it’s not—

Jason shoved him, but Tim was already moving. If Jason hadn’t been there, Tim would have run straight into the trap. He felt somewhere inside of himself that it was the same the other way around.

It was a forced, awful thing to run from that sound. They just did it, and Tim tried to force it from his mind, focusing on the roaring of his pulse in his ears, the feeling of his feet striking the ground, the breath hissing in and out from his lungs.

They ran until they were both out of breath. The wind hissed through the hedges. The temperature dropped.

Tim glanced up.

In a shallow hollow in the hedge wall in front of them, a woman draped in folds of stone fabric held a pile of white snake, a small smile on her marble lips.

“Hang on,” Tim said slowly, “isn’t that the same—”

But before he could finish, a rushing, crunching sound began building behind him. Jason and Tim whirled around together.

The path behind them was being swallowed. The hedge walls were crushing themselves together in a rolling wave. A tangle of thorns and vines and glossy dark leaves bore down on them with frightening speed.

Tim yelped and dove away from it, sprinting down another path. He could hear it behind him, a roar of sound, the colossal crunch as the walls closed in, and he wasn't fast enough—

And then it stopped, all at once. Tim kept running, just because. Shock rabbited through him. What would have happened if he had let it—

He slowed. Stopped. His heart heaved. The hedge walls loomed threateningly above him as he turned around and around, searching. There was a dead end behind him, as though he had come from nowhere at all.

But worst of all, he was alone.

* * *

After Jason made it away from the weird crush of walls, it took him a minute to realize what was wrong: Tim was nowhere in sight.

He called Tim's name once, twice, just in case. Then he swore a lot, just because.

He wondered if Tim was dead. He wondered if that changed anything about the tests. He was surprised to discover that he did not want Tim to be dead, not even a little.

God, this place was getting to him.

After a few exploratory endeavours, he realized that the hedge maze had rearranged itself so he couldn't go back even a little. If Tim was somewhere close by, he was inaccessible to Jason.

Fuck.

Something crawled up his spine, shuddery and cold. He turned to look. Nothing but dark walls and mucky shadows. Fog inched through the narrow way, moved by a slow, unknown air current.

There was nothing he could see, but he felt uncomfortably watched.

He walked. He kept his gun out and ready, though he did remind himself occasionally to check before he shot in case he accidentally shot Tim Drake.

Shadows moved. When he whirled to look, there was never anything there.

He took a left fork, and then a right one. He wished he had a compass, though it probably wouldn't have done him much good.

Another figure moved out of the corner of his eye. This time, when he looked, it stayed put.

It was a shorter, younger figure, staring directly at him, eyes gleaming in the shadows. The figure was dressed as Robin. The figure was too still to be human. The figure was a younger Jason Todd.

Something awful and afraid happened inside of Jason's chest, twisting around, even as his brain fought to comprehend what he was looking

at. He held up his gun and aimed, but as it turned out, it was pretty difficult to make yourself shoot a fifteen-year-old you, no matter how eerie and otherworldly they looked.

The set of his shoulders was young and thin. His expression was blank, remote.

A bird screamed, high and short. Jason jumped, eyes flashing away to the hedge walls.

When he looked back, there was nothing but hedge.

Jason said to the maze, voice razor thin, “Very funny. Hilarious. Have your fucking laugh.”

Plants couldn’t talk, so nothing answered him. There was nothing for him to fight.

Looking around warily, he began walking again. He left the safety off his gun. He wouldn’t shoot Tim, but anything else was fair game.

It didn’t take long before fair game attacked him. It came out from a slender fork he hadn’t seen, and because of this, it nearly got him.

It was a terrible something.

Jason managed to throw it off him, all six legs of it, and before it could scramble around and get him again, he shot it in its hard, curved head three times.

It fell. Its limbs all coiled together immediately, crumpling like a dead spider. The echo of his gunshot took an extra moment to fade.

Catching his breath, Jason examined it. It was vaguely cockroach-like, its blown apart carapace shining oddly in the murky light, like oil on water. It was the size of a labrador.

Everything in here was against them with a strange, impersonal malevolence. Jason found that he did not like facing that malevolence by himself.

Screw Tim Drake.

He kept walking. Eerie whispers followed him, but he didn’t see the younger version of himself again.

The *dead* version of himself.

He heard Dick's voice say, genial and happy, "Jay."

When he whipped around, there was no one there. Because of course there wasn't. Dick was back in Gotham.

After that one, he had to stand in place for a minute, head bowed, chest jumping unevenly, hands clenched to keep them from shaking. It took a while for the anger to crawl back in and restore equilibrium.

Left, left again. Straight.

It spit him out in an open area, which he was instantly suspicious of. Four paths wound off into shadows, and straight across from him: the same white marble statue of a woman, holding a scaled stone snake.

Jason eyed it. He began to inch toward the path closest to him, determined not to be caught out.

Because he was watching the statue, he saw when the snake moved.

It uncurled its glossy marble body and wound itself around the statue's wrist, sightless white eyes fixed on Jason. When Jason didn't look away, the snake lifted its head.

Without altering anything else about her position, the woman lifted her arm to proffer it to Jason.

Jason blew out his cheeks, irritated.

"Y'know," he said out loud, possibly to the snake, possibly to the Labyrinth, "this would be easier with written instructions. Do I avoid you, do I need you for something? I'm just not gonna know until I try it, which. Whatever."

He began to stalk his way across to the snake.

The floor immediately began to try and eat him, which he simply should have seen coming.

He took out a knife and hacked off a thorny vine that had coiled around his wrist, but this did little good, as the hacked off bit began curling around him again. Vines slithered up his shins, their ends jabbing into his calves. They were python-like in their voracity: coiling tighter and tighter and tighter.

He cut the ones around his legs, but once again, this did little in the way of stopping their determination.

Growling to himself, he heaved his leg free and moved it one step. He sliced the vines around his other leg and moved it one step.

Ten feet had never seemed so far away.

The next ones began to slide around his chest. His heart jumped a little, reminding him urgently that it needed room to keep beating.

Struggling to tamp his rising dismay, Jason cut at the vines faster. This proved to be the wrong thing to do, because the faster he hacked, the faster they grew.

He cut. He walked, slowly. The vines encased his legs until he was doing an odd, laboured shuffle forward. Pain began to pulse through him as the blood flow in his body was slowly cut off, pins and needles stabbing at him. There wasn't time to slice through them all—he just needed to—

The statue was within arm's reach when his right knee gave out.

Panic snarled up his throat. The vines snarled up his throat, too. They were cold and rough, thorns pricking into his skin like tiny fish hooks.

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck

He clenched his jaw to keep from opening his mouth to gasp for breath as the vines began to squeeze the air from his chest. The last thing he needed was for thorns to crawl into his mouth.

His arm lifted. Jason had a considerable amount of strength, both from his lifestyle and the added boost from whatever had been in the Lazarus Pit, but it took everything in him to strain his arm forward. The vines curled around his arm until he couldn't see it anymore.

The vines grew up around his face, around his eyes. The world narrowed, slivered, and disappeared into darkness. The tiny thorns jabbed at the skin of his eyelids when he closed them.

Now he couldn't breathe at all. His fingers scrambled for purchase, his whole body straining against the suffocation.

A smooth something drifted onto his hand, then a heavy, thick body dropped onto his arm.

There was a moment where Jason was sure he was going to be

suffocated by vines, and that was how he was gonna go the second time, dying in a horrifying mess of thorny, snake-like vines—and then they stopped getting tighter.

The vines shriveled between one furious heartbeat and the next, losing their strength, going yellow and then brown in an instant. The pressure gone, Jason coughed and coughed and gasped for air, frantically brushing the shriveled stalks off. Dust drifted down around him, withered leaves crumbling under his fingers as he leaned over, bracing his hands on the ground. The vines were dead and decaying, pathetic and starved.

The snake, which was now coiled around his wrist, stared serenely up at him as he inhaled and exhaled, pricks of blood appearing on his bare hands from where the thorns had stabbed him. The sound of his heart beating in his ears was louder than a thunderclap.

“Okay,” Jason said to the snake, which was much heavier than he had anticipated. “So. What. Are you going to eat me now?”

The snake just curled up his arm and then, for all Jason knew, simply turned back to stone.

Jason growled in irritation and stood up, brushing himself off.

Behind him, the statue of the woman watched him go, then climbed off her pedestal and strode off—straight through the hedge walls.

* * *

Tim had been darting through the maze for about ten minutes when he turned a corner and found another monster.

It was huge, because of course it was. The color of mold. Monstrously scaled, jagged spines rippling down its curved back, legs enough to outrun him five times over. It smelled, too: of carrion and rot.

The only good news about it was that it seemed to be asleep.

Tim slowly backed away, automatically quieting his breathing. It shifted a little, and Tim froze.

When it did nothing, he slunk away, down a different path.

Just when he was about to let out a breath, he turned another corner and saw the statue of the robed woman standing on the path in front

of him, blocking his way.

The first thing he noticed was that her snake was gone.

Tim glanced back the way he had come, weighing his odds. Big monster, or white marble statue.

When he turned back, the statue was close enough to touch.

He made a sound of shock and scrambled backwards. She towered more than four feet above him, her blank white eyes fixed on him.

She tipped her head to once side, studying him.

Without moving her mouth, she said, “Who are you?”

Tim didn’t reply. Silence was rarely the wrong answer, and he needed to wrestle his heartbeat back on track.

A beat later, she said, almost to herself, “You were not the original target. This place is not for two.” Her voice was strangely layered, as though she had two or three other voiceboxes that were also talking, a beat behind and a beat ahead of her strongest voice.

Tim found his voice. “The other person in here with me. Where is he?”

Those blank white eyes considered him again for a disconcertingly long time. Finally, she said, “Closer to his goal. The fastest way is through me.”

Tim blinked, then said politely, “All right. Could you excuse me then, please?”

She tipped her head further, uncanny and smooth. “You will have to pay me. If you decide not to, you will have to fight the monster one turn back.”

Tim really didn’t fancy his odds against that thing. “Pay you with what?”

She leaned her great head down to his level, marble face expressionless and blank. All of her movements were eerily fluent, frictionless: she wasn’t weighed down by ligaments and muscles and bones.

She said, “With your fear.”

Tim leaned away from her. Still polite, as it seemed ill-advised to be rude to any creature in this place, he asked, “Sorry. What?”

“Your fear,” she said. He really didn’t care for the fact that she could speak without moving her face.

“Oh. Um. All right, then,” said Tim.

She lifted a smooth white hand. “When was the last time you were afraid?”

“Um,” said Tim, and then he was living it all over again, the last time he’d been really afraid, just like she’d asked for: that freezing night in November, seven weeks back.

Somewhere, Tim knew that he was reliving a memory, viciously clear, astonishing in its accuracy. Somewhere, he could appreciate how much reality the statue was pulling from him.

It was a nasty thing, that night. Their intel had been incomplete, or plans had been changed; it wasn’t relevant, so that bit wasn’t played out. What *was* being played out were the consequences: Robin, who had been posted on watch down by the wharf, who had just *gone in* instead of waiting for backup, because that impulsive, arrogant streak in him could never be quelled, *Jesus God, Damian, you piss me off so much, my* God, *where* are *you*—

Tim watched distantly as the next twenty minutes were spooled out: a brutal, vicious fight in an abandoned warehouse that Tim had had to take on alone . . . a ten-man fight against one, and he’d nearly lost. He'd taken an elbow to the temple. He’d actually gone down, gotten several ugly kicks to the ribs—

All of that was secondary to what had been happening inside him, though: he could hear Nightwing and Oracle and Batman trying to get Robin to respond, and he hadn’t. There was not a peep from his comm. The terror that had mangled his insides worse than any physical wound.

It had been for nothing, though. Damian’s comm had simply malfunctioned; Robin had evaded detection, and Tim caught him before he could walk into any real trouble. Tim had nearly throttled him then and there. The relief had burned, tempered by acidic anger.

The memory ended as suddenly as it had begun. The pull from past to present left Tim slightly nauseous, and he grimaced, trying to reorient

himself. The wind was blowing again, frigid gusts rushing down the narrow alleyways of hedges.

Tim looked up at the statue. Slowly, she straightened, her blank eyes never leaving Tim's face.

She said, "Clarify."

Tim said, "Pardon?"

Almost reluctantly, she said, "Clarify. What were you afraid of? I do not understand. Was there a danger in circumstance?"

Tim didn't understand, either. "No. Um. You saw the whole thing."

"So you were afraid to die." She still sounded dissatisfied.

"No . . . well, it was a tough fight. But I wasn't really . . . I was more afraid for Damian. My little brother," he explained, then wondered if somebody who had just clearly been in his head needed that addendum. "I thought someone had hurt him."

"You were not afraid for yourself, then. You were afraid for the child? Why?" The statue tilted its head again.

"Because they could have hurt him. I don't know." Tim was beginning to be frustrated.

"And why were you afraid of that?"

That brought Tim up short. Did statues feel emotions at all? Was he supposed to explain the concept of love to a sentient rock? He wasn't up for *that,* that was what poets and artists and all that were for, he was an *analyst,* for God's sake—

"He's my brother," Tim tried anyway, shrugging.

"Not in blood," said the statue.

"That doesn't matter," Tim returned immediately. He didn't have time for this. "Look. All you asked for in payment was—"

"So your fear was for your brother."

Tim ground his teeth. " *Yes."*

The statue stared at him some more.

Tim shifted. “So . . . "

The statue said, “I could kill you here, if you wish.”

Tim recoiled sharply. “Um. That isn’t what I asked.”

She gestured with a perfect white hand. “No. You misunderstand. The other was meant to suffer. If you wish, I could end it for you now, and you would be free of the Labyrinth without needing to remain. There would not be pain.”

Tim said, “Well. Erm. Thank you, I think. But I really—”

“It would be a mercy,” she said.

A shiver ran up Tim’s spine, but he said firmly, “Thank you, but no. Now could I—”

She folded her hands. Her face didn’t change at all, but Tim got the distinct, strange impression that she was troubled. “You have paid the price. You may go on.”

Tim hurried past her. She didn’t follow him.

In the next fifteen minutes, Tim ran into two more dead ends and had to backtrack quite a bit, but didn’t see any more monsters.

But then he heard one.

It was on the other side of the hedge wall, and it sounded *big*— long, earth-shaking footfalls, and an ear-numbing drone of a thousand angry wasps.

A second later, Jason Todd bolted around the corner, his shoulder smoking slightly and his gun in his hand.

“Oh,” Tim said. “Hey.”

Jason said, “Oh, hey,” which was probably the least confrontational thing he had ever said to Tim. And then, “We should probably run now.”

“Okay,” Tim said, and then they both ran.

“We seem to run a lot in here,” Tim remarked to him as they went.

“Humiliating, but you gotta do what you gotta do,” Jason said, almost

amiably. “It’s too big to fight.”

Tim risked a glance over his shoulder. The color of mold, a lot of prickly spines. As they rounded a corner, it crashed messily into a hedge wall.

“Ran into a statue, too, did you?” Tim said.

They swerved. The monster did not, from the sound of it, but they kept running nonetheless. And then they had to run some more, because the walls crushed in on themselves again, but Tim was smart enough this time to keep Jason in the corner of his eye.

By the time they felt they could stop, Tim had sweat dripping down his face, and there was a stinging stitch in his side.

“Jesus fuck,” Jason said, hands on his knees.

Tim gestured, panting. “Where’d you get the snake?”

“Statue.”

“Why was the monster chasing you? Nearly snapped your arm off.”

“Statue asked for payment. Said no. Didn’t want her fucking with my head. I don’t mess with that shit,” Jason said. “Had enough of it when I came back from being dead,” and you didn’t really argue when somebody said that, so Tim kept his mouth shut.

Well, for a second. “Okay, so why’s your arm all scratched up?”

Jason scowled. “Plant tried to eat me.”

Tim tried to keep any and every expression off his face. He wasn’t sure how successful he was. “A plant.”

“I don’t want to hear it, Drake.”

“A *plant.”*

“Why are you acting like that’s a preposterous thing to say? You’ve fought Poison Ivy before.”

“Well, yeah. But this place has giant man-eating sea monsters. And you got *got* by a . . . plant?”

“I don’t know how to tell you that things don’t need to have brains to

kill you, Drake, I don't know what your fucking problem is—"

"They're easier to outwit."

"Oh, yeah. Like you outwitted that sea monster? "

"Will you let the sea monster go."

"No."

"I'm beginning to think I'm going to wish that I let the sea monster eat me."

"Well, if you keep insisting that things can't kill you 'cause they're dumb *while they actively kill you* then I'm gonna wish I'd let you, idiot."

"At least mine was a sea monster, plant guy."

They glared at each other, but inside, Tim was secretly just a little teensy bit relieved to see him. He despised being alone.

"Whatever," Jason said, finally. Glowering, he gestured. "Your turn, dipshit."

"Left," said Tim. He peered at the snake wrapped around Jason's arm as they walked. "Does it hurt? Is it heavy? Why did the statue give it to you?"

"Do you always ask so many questions?"

"Yes. How did you get it? Was it attached to the statue?"

"Well, if you gave me a fuckin' second, I'd just tell you, all right?" Jason waited. Tim glared at him. "Okay, okay, sheesh. It just . . . crawled off her and onto me. The plant was also trying to eat me at the time."

"And that's why you look like you lost a fight with a raccoon, yeah, whatever. It crawled onto you like it was alive?"

"The statue," Jason pointed out, "was talking."

"Yes, yeah, but the snake . . . does not look alive. It looks like it's welded to your arm. Is it welded to your arm?"

Jason squinted. "Couldn't say, honestly."

Tim was still examining it. “What if we have to amputate because it’s cut off all the circulation in your arm?”

Jason glanced over at him, a dark eyebrow creeping up. “Do you always jump to the worst possible conclusion?”

“Yes, yeah.”

“Well, then, I guess we’ll find out, won’t we.”

“You seem remarkably unconcerned about this.”

“One of my talents. Seems like one of yours might be just getting wound up about everything. Is it a hobby, or—”

“Shut up.”

They turned another corner, and there was an open circular area. A wide, flat pedestal stood directly opposite them. On the pedestal were several pieces of shattered white stone.

Jason heaved a sigh. “This is where the plant thing ate me last time.”

“This exact place?”

“It was shaped like this. Dunno what that is.” He pointed to the pieces.

“Okay, so.” Tim bounced on the balls of his feet. “Well, somebody has to do it.”

“Figured that out for myself, funnily enough,” said Jason. “So, what. We—”

“Rock, paper, scissors,” said Tim.

Jason paused, swiveling to face Tim with an expression that clearly asked if Tim had lost his mind.

“Rock, paper, scissors,” insisted Tim. “It’s how Damian and I decide who’s gonna take a tough patrol or who gets the last of Alfred’s cookies or who has to go tell Bruce that we put a scratch on the Batmobile because we were seeing how far we could throw batarangs —”

“You *scratched the Batmobile?”* Jason said, with horrified delight.

Tim grimaced. “I lost. I had to be the one to tell Bruce. He did the—” Tim mimed Bruce’s disappointed/trying not to be overly angry face, pinching his nose between his thumb and his forefinger.

“You got the *nose pinch?* Jesus.” Jason smirked, merry and mischievous; for that one moment, he looked like a whole different person. “When I dented the Batmobile—”

“You DENTED IT!”

“ —I got the nostril flare,” finished Jason. “You know, where he does the—” He exhaled loudly and exasperatedly, flaring his nostrils in a passable Bruce mimic, enough that it startled Tim into laughing.

“Dick never touched it, though,” said Tim. “At least not enough to get caught—”

“He SO touched it,” said Jason, at once. “He used to steal that motherfucker so often, and one time we—” He cut off, suddenly, completely. The mirth drained from his expression. He stared out over the hedges, and looked different yet again—Tim didn’t know what that expression meant, why Jason’s eyes suddenly looked streaked and strange, mouth curled with nasty unhappiness, expression caged.

Tim prompted, “What?”

Something slid back into place, and Jason was surly and cool once more in an instant. “Nothing, Timmers. Guess I’m fighting with a plant again.”

Jason had been almost human for a second, and it left Tim feeling oddly unbalanced at how fast he had retreated back behind his impersonal insolence.

“No,” said Tim, stubbornly. “Come on, fair is fair.”

“I’m not doing it.”

“Yes, you are.”

“Holy fucking shit, dude—”

“Do it.”

“*Drake—”*

“One, two—you’re not ready.”

“I’m not getting ready. I am not doing this.”

“You are.”

“I’m not.”

“You are.”

“I am not—”

“I’m counting to three. And no cheating, or any of that funny bomb/gun business. *Just* rock, paper, scissors. Winner gets to plant fight. One, two— *three.”*

They did rock, paper, scissors. Jason did rock. Tim did paper.

Tim heaved a sigh. “Should have just let you. Okay. Here I go.”

“Drake—” Jason rolled his eyes.

“Yep. Here I go.”

He stepped out, one big purposeful stride.

Nothing happened.

He turned to look at Jason.

“Hm,” Tim said.

Jason looked annoyed. “Just keep walking.”

Tim kept walking. Nothing continued happening.

“Oooh, so scary,” said Tim.

“I am gonna fuckin’ . . . ” Jason muttered threateningly.

“Look at all these plants eating me,” said Tim, kicking at the ground. When Jason made another irritated sound, he turned his attention to the task at hand. Stepping up onto the pedestal, he said, “I think these pieces are like . . . an orb, or like a globe of some sort. It’s definitely not pieces off that other statue.”

“Oh,” said Jason. “I think I know this one. Use the snake to hold it together.”

“What? Why?”

“Another myth thing that you would know if you knew how to read, you bougie shit,” said Jason patiently.

Tim ignored this. “How are we going to get it off your arm?”

Jason began walking over to him. “Well, I’d—”

The ground opened like a mouth, and swallowed him.

Tim stared uncomprehendingly at the dark gap in the ground. “Um—Jason?”

“Ow. Fuck. Yeah.”

His voice was echoing slightly.

Tim let out a breath, relief slumping his shoulders. “Are you okay? What’s happened?”

“I fell down a fucking hole, is what happened.” There was a shifting sound, and Jason grunted. “A little over seven feet deep. I can’t get out. Are you going to help me, or what?”

Tim stepped off the pedestal, putting his foot back in the grass.

The grass warped hungrily, sucking him in like quicksand. He wrenched his foot, hard. Wrenched it again. The second time, there was a popping sound, and it freed him. Immediately, the grass returned to normal.

“The ground’s trying to eat me,” Tim said. “I can’t. Do you think—”

Without ceremony, the hole that Jason was in grew smaller.

Tim would have thought he imagined it, but Jason made a small sound. “What the—”

“Oh, man,” said Tim.

“Don’t say that,” snapped Jason. Then, quieter: “*Fuck.”*

Tim’s heart contracted. Adrenaline washed through him: he needed to find a solution where there wasn’t one. *Think,* Tim.

“I—okay. Can you get me that snake somehow?”

“Crawled off me,” said Jason tightly.

Sure enough—Tim saw a long, sleek white thing slithering up out of the hole, abandoning Jason.

Tim turned back to the marble pieces on the pedestal as it slunk toward him. His hands didn't shake—that had been trained out of him long since—but his heart was wrestling somewhere in his throat.

"Jason," he called, fighting to keep his voice nice and even and not-panicked. "Is it still getting smaller?"

There was a long pause before Jason answered. "Narrower and . . . the ceiling is closing. It's slow, but . . . "

But it was still narrowing. Tim could see it, sand through an hourglass. There had been a scene in an old Star Wars movie about this—getting slowly crushed to death by relentless walls. Tim had had a dream about it—

He pushed a piece toward another, grunting a little. It was astonishingly heavy.

He fit two parts of the globe together, arm muscles straining. Now how to get a third piece—but how, with such an awkward shape—

Jason said, "Anytime now, Timmers."

His voice was strained. He had speckled bravado too heavily over his fear to disguise it properly.

Tim glanced at the hole.

It was still closing.

Tim shuffled, bracing the two marble pieces together with his body. Shoved the third on top. The marble was icy cold to touch, and the chill seeped into his skin.

"*Tim,"* Jason snarled: an animal held by its throat.

"Yep," said Tim, looking around at the grass.

The snake was slowly slithering up through the grass.

Tim wrestled with the smooth marble. The pieces jostled unevenly, threatening to break right apart again. His fingers were going numb from the cold.

He got the fourth piece into place, and immediately, the third piece slid away. Tim cursed under his breath, fighting to keep the rest of it together.

The snake stopped moving, holding its position at the base of the pedestal.

In the hole, Jason gave a half-suppressed, strangled sound. It was one of the worst sounds Tim had ever heard—it should have been a private thing, that kind of awful panic, and he should never have been privy to Jason Todd making that sound.

Tim shoved the errant piece back in. Held it together with his body. His teeth were chattering.

The snake slowly made its way up the pedestal. Tim glared at it.

It slipped up around the globe, curling around the pieces. It took its tail in its mouth, and the cracks on the globe disappeared.

Tim glanced up.

In the hedge wall behind him, a doorway opened. Through it, Tim could see bricks, lanterns—and a lithe, slender woman snapped her head around, white hair swishing. When she caught sight of Tim, her eyes widened.

Rhea.

It all happened in a split-second, and then Tim saw no more, because he'd let the globe go and turned back to the hole in the ground.

The doorway shut. Tim didn't notice, and even if he had, he wouldn't have cared.

He put one foot on the grass, waiting, fists clenched tightly.

It didn't swallow him. He bolted.

"Jason," he said, and it was his Red Robin voice—emotionless, in control, evenly assessing the situation. "Are you down there? Can you grab my hand?"

There was a very, very long pause.

"Go from the other side," said Jason's voice, hoarsely. "I can't . . . turn around."

Tim scrambled to the other side, and reached his arm down into the hole. It felt like sticking his hand into a bear trap, and he half waited for it to snap shut on his arm.

It didn't. Jason's hand closed around his wrist, and Tim shoved his other arm down, and he hauled Jason up and out.

Tim did most of the lifting, muscles locking and pulling with strength born of six years of hard training and fighting. Jason barely had the leg room to help him anyway.

Once Jason was out, he closed his eyes, bent over, breath hissing in and out. He was dirty and bruised and tense, an fox sprung from a trap.

Jason had about a second to get himself together before the ground began to rumble and shake, the world jarring itself like it was going to split in two.

Tim grabbed Jason's arm and shoved him to his feet. Jason barely had the breath to spit a swear word at him.

There was another doorway, opposite the one Tim had seen only moments before. Nothing had ever seemed so far away.

The world was crashing behind them, the hedge walls collapsing to the ground below with the colossal sound of an earthquake. The cracking followed them all the way to the doorway, racing them; ten feet away, and it nearly had Tim—for one wild second, Tim's right foot felt empty air, but Jason wrenched him away from the edge. They just managed to make it through the doorway before it smashed closed behind them, overgrown with thick brambles and dense, pointed leaves. Branches reached through like fingers.

The world was very silent after that. Tim's heart was crashing in his ears.

They had come out on a steel platform, and all around them was frightening, crushing darkness. The platform was only about seven feet by seven feet—not overly small, but definitely not enough to give any illusion of safety.

It made Tim think fleetingly of video games, and loading screens. Were they stuck in a *loading screen* while the Labyrinth . . . what. Thought of another test for them?

Jason sat and braced his hands on his knees, breathing out in a way that suggested he was trying to be purposeful about it. He looked like he was going to be sick, face ashen and coated with sweat.

Tim looked away. He would have hated for anyone to see him like this, and he hated that he was seeing Jason like this for Jason's sake.

How awful it would be, for everyone to know things you didn't want them to know, even when you hadn't disclosed it. Few people knew about Tim's darkest moments, but all of them had been told by Tim himself, in the strictest of confidence and trust.

Tim knew exactly why being closed in like that— in the *ground*— would have triggered something terrible inside of Jason, and he was disgusted that he knew.

He let down both of their packs. Fishing out the last of his food—a cold sandwich—and his half-empty water bottle, he brought them back over to Jason.

Tim shoved the water bottle at Jason's hand, insistently enough that Jason sat back and unscrewed the lid, taking a drink without looking at Tim.

Nearly without thinking about it, Tim did what he usually did when Dick or Damian or Kon got like this—he moved around behind Jason and sat down, pushing their backs together.

Jason tensed, and Tim waited for him to tell Tim to fuck off.

It didn't happen. Tim felt Jason relax, just a little.

Tim would have hated it if anybody had said anything to him under similar circumstances. So he said nothing.

It took a long time for Jason's breathing to even back out. When it did, Tim reached around to offer Jason the sandwich without looking around at him.

Jason noticed it after a moment. Without taking it, he said, voice still hoarse, "This better not be the last of your food."

"It's not," Tim lied.

Jason took it. He didn't move away from Tim.

After he'd finished it, he said, "So what now?"

There was nothing but the overgrown doorway and a drop into a whole lot of nothing.

So he'd ruined it. There had been a door, and then, what—he was supposed to take it then and there, and leave Jason to be suffocated to death?

He said, "I don't know."

Chapter 5

It was the afternoon of Christmas Eve, and Bruce Wayne was standing in a goddamn Whole Foods grocery store.

He hadn't meant to be standing in a goddamn Whole Foods grocery store. But Alfred had run out of heavy cream while making their Christmas Eve dinner, and Dick had been in the other room with a sliced-open shoulder after a rough go with a gang the north side of Bludhaven, and Damian had been brooding in his room, and Bruce had been feeling terrible and restless. So Bruce had said "I'll run out and get some," and he'd left before anybody could stop him.

So now here he was, multi-millionaire Bruce Wayne, standing in the fridge section of a local grocery store with a chipped plastic basket in the same hand that had a five hundred thousand dollar watch cinched around its wrist, and he sort of felt like the milk section was mocking him for being there at all.

He knew why Dick had injured his shoulder in a fight he should have won with his eyes closed. Dick hadn't been sleeping, spread too thin, he wasn't asking for help—and he was getting sloppy because of it. And now he was angry at Bruce for intervening at all, and Damian was furious with Bruce for everything else.

It had been days. There was not a single hair out of place anywhere that could give any indication where his two middle sons had gone. Half the Justice League had been pulled into the search by Clark once he'd gotten wind of it (insufferable, affectionate, meddling Metropolitan that he was) and nobody had been able to turn up anything. Selina had found no leads even with her best allies on it. Tim's team was probably still out searching despite the fact that it was Christmas Eve. Barbara was furious with herself for being unable to find even a shred of evidence. Damian wanted to be out there looking, and it was just a matter of time—

"Has this milk personally wronged you in some way?"

Bruce glanced around.

A mild-looking man with a short beard was eyeing him with polite, amused interest, hands folded neatly. There was a bull-shaped pin on his tie.

Bruce hoped to God that this man hadn't recognized him. He was *not* in the mood to be Bruce Wayne, charming and charismatic and larger than life.

"No," said Bruce, powerfully polite, moving out of the way. "I'm sorry for blocking you."

"Not at all." The man reached over and plucked up a half gallon of milk. There was an oddly graceful way about the way he moved, and Bruce couldn't quite place his accent. "My apologies, Mr. Wayne."

So he *had* been recognized. Bruce braced himself.

But the man simply gave him a swift, bland smile and moved off.

When he went to check out, there was a woman arguing with the cashier, the lines in her face deep and anxious. There was a toddler on her hip, shrieking his head off, wrapped in a threadbare blanket.

Bruce eyed her groceries. Soup. Ramen. Milk. Eggs. Several items sat beside the cashier, off the conveyer belt, clearly already taken off her purchase list.

"Okay, so if you take off the soup—"

The cashier was shaking his head. "Still not enough, ma'am. I'm sorry, but there's really nothing I can—"

Bruce set down his basket, already pulling out his wallet. "Put it all back on. I've got it, if you'd like."

The woman swiveled. Her eyes narrowed with distrust at this comfortable, wealthy-looking businessman, but the toddler crying was clearly doing a valiant number on her pride. Her face was tired, her coat thin.

"Well, if . . . if you're sure, sir," she said, shifting the toddler. "That would be . . . thanks."

Bruce paid for her things. She reached for the bag, trying to wrestle with the child at the same time.

"Please," said Bruce. "I've got it. I remember when mine was that age."

A lie, a small one, meant to comfort her. Dick had been eight, but he still remembered how monumentally exhausting it could be,

wrangling a determinedly furious child.

This lessened her distrust a little. She did not smile, but she did nod, wrapping her child up firmly before heading outside.

“I’ll be back,” said Bruce to the cashier, and then he walked out with the woman.

It was snowy, blustering and cold, pitch-dark even though it was four-thirty p.m. Christmas lights waved in the wind, and “Have a Holly Jolly Christmas” blasted jeeringly at them from the bright store as they left it behind.

Bruce stayed a good few feet from her, giving her space. Her eyes kept darting to him, clearly wondering what the hell he wanted, and if he was going to do something to her. Her child was bundled tightly against her chest, protecting him from the wind.

She was so nervous by the time they got to her small, banged up car that he simply set the groceries down beside it, smiled tersely at her, and told her quietly, “Have a good night.”

She nodded hastily at him, then said, when he had begun to move off, “You too. Thanks, again.”

As he walked off, he heard her talking to the child, voice gently exasperated and quiet, fussing at him as she put him into the car.

It got so complicated when they got older.

Bruce wished he could bundle his children up and protect them that easily. His arms weren’t big enough anymore.

Back in front of the grocery store, there was a bench beside the sliding door. Despite the fact that the wood looked bitterly cold to be sitting on, the mild-faced man in the bull pin sat on it, looking unconcerned. When Bruce glanced at him, the man held up a grocery bag.

“Yours,” he explained. “I took care of it.”

“Thank you. You didn’t need to do that.”

“You did. That was kind.” He paused, glancing out into the snowy night. “Not many are, anymore.”

Bruce nodded and took his bag. The accent was going to drive him crazy. “Well, every little bit helps, I suppose. Have a good night.”

“You too, Mr. Wayne. And may I add—”

Bruce turned and looked at him expectantly. His phone had just buzzed, but he didn’t want to take his eyes off this strange man while he was this close. Something about him was unsettling.

The man was looking off into the distance, eyes staring into nothing. “Too forward of me, I believe. Forgive me for that. But I—am sorry about what you are going through with your missing sons.”

His voice was very controlled, words carefully chosen.

Bruce just nodded, suddenly very tired. He turned and walked away, reaching into his coat pocket for his phone.

* * *

Markos did not watch Bruce Wayne go. He was busy thinking about children.

He had been curious, and he should not have been. He should not have spoken with Mr. Wayne. It only reminded him that the people he had sacrificed on purpose had family—that they were somebody’s sons. They were that man’s sons, the man who paid for other people’s groceries.

He had seen the news. They had gone missing as Timothy Drake-Wayne and Jason Todd, so they had been reported missing as such. There was a nation-wide manhunt for them.

They would never even find any bodies. Markos would be the only person in the world who would ever know what happened to them. Bruce Wayne would never know, and he would never see his children again.

It took parents so long to give up. And some never did. Markos wondered how long it would take Bruce Wayne to stop looking for his sons.

Terrible, what one went through with children, what one went through when they were gone—

A memory, swimming up through the years: a child. A beautiful, bright-haired girl, laughing at him, calling for him, her chubby hands opening and closing like starfish: *Patéras, patéras!*

Markos sat on the bench outside of a grocery store, and wished he had never been born.

* * *

They sat on the platform for at least an hour—a really long, terrible hour in which Tim envisioned how long it would take for them to starve to death at least eight times, because Jason refused to talk (which, as it turned out, was somehow worse than him talking) — before the Labyrinth decided to let them out.

Another doorway appeared opposite the overgrown, brambled doorway. It led to another tunnel.

It was dark, when they stepped through. The floor was black packed-down dirt. Long, spider-thin plants jutted out of the soil along the walls and the ceiling, giving off an eerie white-blue phosphorescent glow. It was the only sort of light in the deep darkness. Crumbled stones littered the ground, with spindly half-formed trees sprouting here and there like insect legs. It smelled like underground: rotting leaves and damp soil.

Tim and Jason wordlessly rolled to their feet. Tim handed Jason his backpack.

As soon as they were through the door, it closed.

It was so much darker than anything before. Tim's eyes strained against the deep, vicious shadows, ears tuned to the slightest of noises.

It was another fifteen or so minutes before Jason said, "It's quiet."

He sounded troubled by this.

"Don't jinx it," Tim told him, kicking at a rock out of his way. "We'll start hearing screaming birds again."

"This isn't hell, this is some kind of terrible fucking purgatory," said Jason, sounding peeved. Tim would never have said it, but he was glad to hear it; it was better than Jason's oppressive silence. "Wish it would eat us faster. In fact, I—"

A sound hissed along their tunnel, light and uneasy.

Jason and Tim went silent instantly, both of them still and coiled. Tim

slowed his heartbeat, and his hand slid to where he'd replaced his knife. Jason's hand slipped into his pocket.

There was a very long, awful silence.

Nothing moved again.

After a long time, Tim looked at Jason until Jason looked back. Jason's eyes were strange in the low light. He gave a half-shrug in response to the question on Tim's face.

"You sure you want it to eat us faster?" Tim asked, low.

Jason said, "Fuck all the way off."

They kept moving.

Another half hour passed before Jason said, "Do you think we'll figure it out if Rhea wins? Or do you just think we'll be stuck here forever?"

"I don't know," said Tim. "I saw her. A little while ago."

"You *what?"* Jason stopped walking. "When?"

Tim scrubbed at his hair, thinking. His tummy had time to rumble pointedly.

Part of his consciousness had been turning this over in his brain since it had happened. "I saw a door," he said, after a minute. "It opened after I finished the globe thing. Like *right* after. And then I saw her through it. Then I think the door closed, I don't know. But I think that means she hasn't won yet, right?"

Jason stared at him, eyes narrowed and flinty. It was a cool, calculating sort of look.

"What," said Tim.

"I saw a door, too," said Jason, in an uncharacteristically careful sort of way. "Before that fuckin' tentacle monster tried to drag you to . . . Davy Jones' locker, or whatever."

"*Davy Jones' locker?"* Tim repeated. "Hi, Dick? I didn't realize that I was speaking with Richard Grayson down here—"

"I'm gonna break your nose," said Jason patiently. "Do you hear us? This place is a fucking mind trap. It's trying to split us up, or

something."

"I mean, if we weigh the evidence," said Tim, "and the times the doors appeared to us, I think it's actually trying to get us to leave the other one to die."

They eyed each other. Another sliver of automatic, paranoid distrust crawled up Tim's spine and lodged pointedly in his throat.

Anger flashed across Jason's face, turning him instantly into the mercurial, callous person Tim was more familiar with. "Don't give me that fucking look. I know what that look means."

Tim snapped, "You don't know anything, Todd."

"I saved you from *drowning.* And you have the nerve to look at me like I stole your firstborn child—"

Tim looked at him witheringly. "Would you save the theatrics."

"You people wouldn't trust me if I sawed off my own leg to let you out of a cage."

Tim threw up his hands. "Who is ' *you people!'* I am a singular person, thanks—"

"You and your whole fucking family—"

Tim whirled around and stomped forward down the tunnel. "I don't know why you think you can get out of this family by just referring to them as just *mine,* but in fact, it's—"

Tim didn't get to finish his sentence, because he was too busy falling into nothingness.

His fingers managed to snag the edge of what he'd fallen off, and he clung on, breath short and fast. His feet scrabbled at a sheer cliff face. He'd fallen off a *cliff.*

Jason said, " *Drake?* Shit, hell, and fuck—"

Tim forced out, "Don't come forward. You'll fall in." He tested the wall with one of his boots again, but no dice; it slid right off. His fingers curled tighter. It kind of felt like hanging off the edge of a building, but there was no grappling hook to save him if he chose to let go.

“Not all of us are fucking *idiots.”* Jason’s head appeared over the ledge. His mouth was curled mockingly. “Think I’m gonna let you fall now? Is that what you think of me?”

“Yes, Jason, I think you’re going to Lion King me right into the abyss,” Tim snapped through gritted teeth, adjusting his grip slightly. “Creepy Scar voice and all—”

Jason made a show of making himself comfortable as Tim tried in vain to climb back up. “You know, I think this is character-building. It’s me, the big baddie, about to let poor wittle Dwake fall off a big cwiff—”

“Long live the king, and all that,” said Tim, grunting with the effort of shoving himself up. He slipped again, catching himself by his fingertips again. Let out a sharp breath of annoyance, he added, “Or was it ‘I killed Mufasa—’”

One of his hands slipped off.

Jason’s hand instantly shot out and closed tightly around Tim’s wrist, viselike and sure. “Depends on which scene you’re talking about. Also, notice how I am not shoving you off,” he said. “Very benevolent of me.”

“Are you gonna let me hang off this cliff forever?” said Tim, grabbing Jason’s wrist in return for stability. “Because I’m just gonna let myself fall if it’s all the same to you.”

“Drama queen,” muttered Jason, and together they hauled Tim back up onto stable ground.

Plants began to light up one by one along the walls, still eerily blue-white. Slowly, the room lightened enough that they could see the magnitude of it, the sheer size of the drop that Tim had nearly fallen off—and their next challenge.

Tim brushed himself off and said dryly, “Well, at least neither of us is afraid of heights.”

Jason leaned over and peered down, down, down into the black nothing. It was a bottomless *well* of darkness.

“I don’t know about you, Drake,” he drawled, “but I am actually a little wary of falling into a hole that doesn’t have a bottom.”

Tim walked over to the swinging rope bridge and eyed it dubiously.

“This,” he said, “looks structurally unsound.”

“So says Tim Drake, rope bridge expert,” said Jason, following him over. “Your contribution will be duly noted at the end of all this.”

It was barely a rope bridge. First of all, there was no railing of any kind. Multiple ropes were strung from the ceiling to the bridge, holding it up, but there was nothing stopping them from toppling straight off the side. Second of all, the smooth planks were inches apart—far enough that if you stepped even a little too soon, you’d slip right between the cracks.

It swayed slightly from side to side.

“After you,” said Tim.

“You’re hilarious.”

“Okay, rock-paper-scissors—”

“That is so fucking dumb,” said Jason. “And I am not doing it, because fair is fucking fair, I guess. Jesus *Christ,* I hate this and I hate you—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah . . . wait, hang on.”

Jason paused with one foot on the first plank. “Not funny, jackass. Why?”

“Because there’s got to be a fucking . . . catch to this. There’s no way we can just *walk* across.”

Jason glanced pointedly at the swaying rope bridge over an unknown abyss, at Tim, back to the swaying rope bridge over an unknown abyss, and back at Tim.

“Yeah, I get that,” said Tim. “But there’s . . . hang on.”

Tim swung his backpack off and began to root around in it.

“I bet it’ll snap once we’re halfway across,” said Jason thoughtfully. “We’ll have to climb it like a ladder.”

“That’s a thing that happens in action movies, not in real life.”

“Oh, yeah. Because I’ve never done anything in my very own real life

that would appear in an action movie. Swinging from building to building? Normal. Firing weapons while flipping through the air? Ordinary. Disguising my true identity while I wreak havoc on a city, mostly in the dead of night? Perfectly normal and fine, mundane, really—"

"I'm trying to see if there's a hole monster that's going to jump up and eat us," snapped Tim. He found what he was looking for and lit the flare, which seared at his vision and made Jason bark a surprised swear word. Tim pulled his arm back and hurled it gracefully into the pit.

It made a clean, piercing arc through the air, and down, down, down it fell, until it finally slammed into the ground below.

Tim and Jason regarded the contents of the pit, discernable not necessarily because of how clearly they could see them, but because of how instantly familiar they were, dull and jagged and dusty.

"Naturally," said Tim. "Of course it's full of skeletons. Why wouldn't it be full of skeletons?"

"Well, *that's* cliche," said Jason, tutting. "Skeletons. Snakes would be —"

Tim reached over and slammed his hand over Jason's mouth, which Jason promptly licked.

Tim leapt away from him. "Oh, my God, what are you, SIX? Would you shut up? This place is going to hear you."

Jason smacked his hands together in a poor semblance of a prayer. "Dear very big and scary Labyrinth: I did not mean it. If you send snakes for Christmas, please send them into Tim Drake's sleeping bag. Thank you."

Tim pointed at the rope bridge and gave Jason a look.

"Yeah, Dick, whatever you say." Jason put his foot back on the rope bridge, tested it gingerly, then put his full weight on it.

Nothing happened.

Jason stepped over to the next plank, balancing expertly, and then the next. Tim followed him once he was on the third plank.

It was surprisingly unnerving. Tim had balanced on his share of buildings, railings, statues, skyscrapers. Heights had ceased to faze him. This, however, was a completely different animal: it was a tightrope act on a child's hastily thrown together history project, unstable and windswept. And it was a very long way down.

Jason said, "I'd take a fucking Gotham skyscraper over this any day. Jesus."

Jason's every move disturbed Tim's balance, and Tim knew it was vice versa. Speed was out of the question, because they both had to adjust every time the other moved.

Tim was only three planks across, and Jason six, when the ghost came out.

It started with a laugh that made Tim's hair stand on end. Jason immediately fell into a crouch for stability, body coiling. Tim's arms windmilled a bit before he found his balance again.

"You're certainly much faster than the last ones." The voice was gleeful, terrible, and close. There was nothing attached to it. "They sat there forever trying to find a different way across. Some of them jumped off on purpose, you know. Boring. Boring. More fun this way."

"What the *fuck,"* snarled Jason, vicious as a pit viper at once.

A man, or at least the semblance of one, appeared in midair next to them. He was strangely colorless, and Tim couldn't quite tell where the darkness of the cavern ended and he began.

The ghost smiled at Tim with a mouth that stretched too wide. He was restlessly thin, with a sharp, clever face and large eyes. Those eyes fixed on Tim and drilled in, and Tim bristled. The ghost looked thrilled that Tim was there, and Tim immediately wanted to put his foot in the ghost's face.

Tim slowly lowered his own body down closer to the plank, expertly balancing on it to give himself maximum stability. "Just because you died down here doesn't mean you have to haunt it forever."

"Ooh, Timothy Drake, bat extraordinaire, the one nobody cares about." The ghost cackled. "And Jason Todd, the one everybody cares too much about. How you been? How's the Labyrinth, how's the tests? You're doing fine, by the fact that you've made it to me." His voice was fast and bulldozing, like a car salesman. There were a lot of teeth

involved.

Tim flexed his jaw. He watched Jason's shoulders knot with visible tension.

After a moment, Jason half-raised himself and stepped forward, purposefully ignoring the ghost. Tim followed him.

The ghost vanished and instantly reappeared directly in front of Jason, who lurched backwards before he found his balance again.

The ghost grinned, upside down. "Suppose I should introduce myself. Pavlos. Been dead a long time. You and I have half of that sentence in common. A crowbar, huh? Oof." Pavlos flipped right side up and tutted sanctimoniously, hovering in midair. "Dreadful, really." His face changed—stretched. His colorless hair turned green, his eyes bulging from their too-white sockets. The crocodile grin widened, the face insidious and cruel.

Tim's stomach wrung itself out.

"Just," said the Joker, " *dreadful."*

Jason dropped down into a crouch again, head tilted up, terribly still. There was something in awful in the way his hands opened and closed, searching for something to grab onto.

"And how'd you die," said Tim, cutting and cold. "Forgot to look where you were walking?"

The Joker fixed his awful gaze on Tim, who felt something icy crawl up his spine. He stepped around Jason, smiling, and said, voice shifting, "Come on, Tim. I was only kidding."

It was instantaneous. One second, he was the Joker, vicious grin fixed in place, and the next, it was the broad, handsome face of Conner Kent, joyful, easy smile on his face, ink-black hair windswept and ruffled.

Something jammed inside of Tim, his heartbeat fumbling, and it took him a long moment to collect himself, line up his thoughts in a way that made sense.

He understood the Labyrinth's reasoning. Pavlos' reasoning. It was the smart thing to do, to plague them with their loved ones they might never see again. To switch between psychological and physical

torments.

That didn't stop anger from pulsing through him, hot and grieving. He wanted to scream. *Take off his face. Take it off!*

But that wouldn't get him anywhere.

He focused on the planks again. It was not Conner. No matter how accurate the face was, the inflections of the voice, there was none of the warmth that Conner Kent exuded at all times.

Tim stepped forward again. Jason felt him move, and took his cue; he stepped onto the next plank.

Conner— *Pavlos*— floated down until he was directly in front of Tim.

"Come on, Tim," he said, and it was Conner's voice exactly, gentle and teasing.

"Go to hell," said Tim coolly, and made the mistake of looking up at the not-Conner.

Pavlos' jaw unhinged, opening far too wide. Rows and rows of shark teeth jutted out at Tim from Conner's well-loved face— Pavlos leaned forward, eyes shifting to the bloody red of Conner's heat vision.

Instinct alone kept Tim from lurching backwards off the bridge. He crouched all the way down and gripped the plank he was standing on until his knuckles turned white.

Yellowed skulls grinned up at him from the space between the boards.

Jason asked, "Tim?"

Pavlos laughed with Conner's voice, delighted and broad. "Got ya, huh? Turns out baby bird over there can't take a joke, Jay."

It was terrible, the easy way his voice changed and twisted until it was someone else entirely between one half-sentence and the next. The perfect copy of Dick balanced easily on his hands in midair, smiling his inside-joke smile at Jason.

Jason's head moved to look at the not-Dick, then slowly moved forward again. Every muscle in his body was tense, wound to the utmost.

Voice low and dangerous, Jason said, "*Fuck* you."

Not-Dick winked at Tim as though Jason had just said something mildly funny. Tim shuddered with anger and slowly pushed himself back to his feet, which was much harder than going down into a crouch. The backpack created an odd counterweight that he had to account for, and it took several long seconds before he was securely standing again.

Steeling himself, Tim stepped forward. Jason felt him move, and to Tim's relief, he moved to another plank.

It was harder to balance, now that they were in the very middle. The rope bridge swung slowly. No matter how much Tim wished they could bolt across, leave this horrid ghost behind, he knew that Pavlos might even be counting on that: speed would create an easy target for clumsy mistakes.

Dick was still talking, easy and pointless chit-chat, when it suddenly cut off.

Pavlos used Dick's voice to make an odd, hopeless noise.

Despite every ounce of logic in his body telling him to ignore it, Tim stopped automatically, eyes darting to not-Dick.

Dick looked beseechingly at Jason and made a broken, panicked noise. Blood began to pool in the whites of his eyes, dripping out in twin lines of red. Blood poured from his nose. He fell to his knees, mouth opening in pleading panic.

"Jay," he said, in a voice that made it clear that there was something in his lungs.

Tim was frozen.

Dick let out a mangled cry. His body jerked. His legs bicycled.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tim saw Jason looked over his shoulder at Tim, and that was the only thing that could have made Tim wrench his gaze away from Dick dying, latching on to Jason's stare. Jason's eyes were trapped; afraid. It was a naked, honest expression, and it managed to ground some part of Tim—the knowledge that of anyone in the world, he and Jason felt exactly the same way about Dick Grayson dying: there was no part of them that didn't shrink in horror at the thought.

An inhuman shriek startled Tim again, and Pavlos appeared between

them, leering at Tim. He was pale and elfish once more, and his eyes pinned Tim with a consuming curiosity.

Over Pavlos' slightly transparent shoulder, Tim watched in real time as Jason pulled out his arrogant, supremely annoyed mask. Between one heartbeat and the next, he was disdainful, sneering. Of course he hadn't just watched in disturbed abhorrence as his older brother begged for his life; this man cared for nothing and no one.

Now that Tim had seen what was underneath, he wondered how he had been fooled for so long.

The ghost cackled at him, a mad, disturbing sound. "Timmy, Tim, Tim. Always good for a laugh. You know, Jay—"

It was Roy Harper. Tim wasn't as familiar with Harper, but it was clearly for Jason's torment.

Tim watched Jason's shoulders move as he took a breath, squared himself. He stepped on to another plank, and Tim followed him.

Despite watching their loved ones perform various horrors including splitting apart into otherworldly creatures, die terribly, beg them for help, or simply talk to them with disturbing casualty, they pressed onward.

Jason, three planks ahead, finally made it to the other side. He turned to Tim, face stony, mouth a deadly curl.

Of course, Pavlos wouldn't let it go without a fight. He appeared in front of Tim, his face twisting grotesquely as he pulled it from Cass' to someone else's.

"Ah, Tim," he said. "You wouldn't be leaving without a proper goodbye, now, would you?"

And Tim was staring at his father.

And Tim was staring at his father.

Jack Drake smiled benignly at him, affable and pleasant, one of his rare good moods. In that moment, he looked solid and real, standing on a plank, more real than anything around them. "Hey, Tim. How's it going?"

Tim's lungs wouldn't inflate. He started to move backwards, away

from his dad—his *dad*—

Jason's voice sliced through the illusion, slamming Tim back into reality. It was urgent, loud, no false show of insolence in sight. "Tim, *stop moving."*

Tim stopped moving. He let out a breath, slow and measured. He pulled Red Robin out of his back pocket and onto his face.

The rope bridge swung slowly. Tim's foot was halfway off the edge of his plank from where he'd tried to step backward.

His father's face cracked into a terrible, uncharacteristic grin. "That's a pretty good trick. Your heart even slowed back down."

He stepped closer.

Tim said, voice low, "It's not you."

Jack's face soured with displeasure.

The trepidation that sliced through Tim was bone-deep, instinctual. He tensed. *Don't move. Don't move.*

Jack Drake had always used space as a precise way of intimidation, of power. He stepped inside Tim's space, looming over him.

Tim smelled cigar smoke. A specific cologne. The scent of a dry-cleaned suit.

He couldn't help the small movement his own body performed in response, and this time, his foot slipped off, and the rest of him followed. A small cry burst out of him.

Tim managed to seize the plank with both hands, gripping the far side of it as he fell. His chin smacked against the wood. He bit his tongue, hard, and copper flooded his mouth.

Jack laughed, callously amused, looming high above Tim. "Whoops. There he goes." The accent was his, all old-money power and diamond-hard contempt.

Tim's legs kicked at the air. He let out a short, harsh breath, and then another.

Tim said, "Don't. You'll throw off my balance." His voice didn't sound like his, but at least it didn't waver.

Tim watched as Jason pulled his foot off the plank and retreated back to solid ground, looking doubtful. He sank down to an automatic, weaponized crouch, one hand resting gently on the ground. All of him was poised to spring.

Tim got a better grip on the plank and pulled his upper body up, painfully slowly. His legs jerked fruitlessly.

“I don’t think this is how Lion King goes,” Jason said thoughtfully, confidence sprinkled too heavily over his voice to really sell Tim on it. “This is feeling a bit more like the actual Hamlet.”

“Oh, so he reads Shakespeare,” grunted Tim, hauling one knee up onto the plank with difficulty. “Of course he does.”

Jack lowered himself beside Tim until their faces were next to each other and said, low enough that Jason couldn’t hear, “He’ll kill you, you know? A killer. You’ve got to be careful with those. ‘Course, what right do I have to talk? I was fooled by one. You killed me just the same, huh? Even if you weren't holding the knife.”

This stabbed far into Tim’s underbelly, where a wound had never quite finished healing.

He pulled his other knee up. He curled his feet underneath him. He focused on his body, on the easy, hard-won control he had over it, on the breath hissing in and out of him. He could do this, and he would stand up without flipping over the edge, the way the plank wanted him to.

Jason told the ghost precisely how he could get fucked in several compound sentences. Tim heard several combinations of swear words that he had never heard before, which was saying something.

Without answering, Jack Drake changed into a woman with short blond hair that Tim had never seen before and simply turned to look at Jason. Her eyes were wide and mournful.

Tim got back to his feet.

Jason was staring at the woman with a frozen, undone expression, eyes streaked and wild. He looked like he had forgotten how to move.

In two swift, ungainly steps, Tim threw himself across the planks to solid ground, tumbling messily down next to Jason. He shoved Jason, hard, and then again, because Jason wouldn’t budge.

On the third hard shove and Tim's " *Jason,"* Jason blinked, shook himself, and budged.

Pavlos laughed behind them, mad and knowing. He didn't seem at all perturbed that they hadn't died.

"Goodbye!" he shrieked after them. "Best of luck! Don't worry, there's worse than me out there! We'll see each other again! It's a small Labyrinth, after all—"

He began to sing nonsensically, voice echoing down the tunnel after them.

It took a long time for Pavlos' voice to fade back into the silence of the tunnels.

* * *

The tunnels were now not so much tunnels as twisting caves of rough blue-black rock, with uneven ceilings and coarse dirt at their feet. The lights were still those odd, creepy white-blue plants. And Jason was hungry, unnerved, and, of course, angry—it was just that there were so many other things going on that the anger was getting shoved to the side, which he did not appreciate.

The more they walked, the more Jason was inside it, the more his brain screamed at him: this was not a place to inhabit.

He hated tunnels. It was like he was—

Don't think about it

—being buried alive—

Don't think about it

Jason wanted to talk, and he didn't want to talk. He kept hearing Roy's laughter. Dick's dying breaths. His mother's face.

His mother's face—

—a crowbar bashing mercilessly into his skin and muscle and bones, his biological mother tied up, the taste of blood and the knowledge that *she* had sold him out—

Stop it.

“Hey,” said Jason, when he couldn’t take it anymore.

Tim looked at him. Where there was usually keen, bright activity, there was something muffled and dull that looked back at him through Tim’s eyes. It made him look startlingly old.

It was something that Jason could appreciate.

“I don’t know,” said Jason, a slight note of defensiveness creeping into his voice despite the fact that Tim hadn’t said anything. “I just . . . I hate this, okay?”

It was the only thing he could think of to say.

Something like understanding crept across Tim’s expression. It was easier to swallow than Tim’s usual face, which constantly held the careful neutrality of someone who was analyzing you.

Jason hated being analyzed. He could handle being understood.

Tim said, “I’ve only read Hamlet once. And no other Shakespeare.”

Jason blinked incredulously at him. “Excuse me? Didn’t you have like a fancy-ass education? What the fuck were they teaching you?”

Tim’s expression was careful again. Jason never once thought before he spoke. Tim had the look of someone who was about to say one thing and ended up saying something entirely different. “I did for a while,” he said finally. “But I dropped out near the end. And got my GED. Stuff with . . . my dad.”

He said “my dad” the way people talked about active bombs.

Jason said, “Was that your dad? Back there?”

Tim was quiet for a long time, looking away as they walked. Finally he said, voice expressionless, “Yeah. Who was that last lady?”

Jason said, voice equally toneless, “My biological mother.”

“So you were adopted?”

Jason bristled automatically. “No.”

“So your . . . biological mother raised you.”

“No.”

“What happened to your biological mother?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, you are not authorized to access that information.”

They walked in silence for a second before Tim said abruptly, “He died. My dad. An assassin killed him.” There was a long pause. Then, voice subdued and meticulously offhand, he added, “It was my fault.”

An even longer silence.

Jason didn’t say anything. He was not the person to absolve Tim, and he wasn’t the comforting type, either. He had known that Tim’s father had been murdered in the impersonal way one knows that a classmate’s parents had been divorced or that one’s neighbor had a dog. Self-exile though he was, he still knew things about the bat family.

It was different, hearing it out loud from Tim. How terrible the statement was, in its simplicity. Tim did not offer any further information, and Jason didn’t ask.

“I actually did pretty well in school,” said Jason at last, when they had walked for ten or so more minutes. “And I actually also went to one of those dumb fancy schools after . . . I went to live with Bruce. I liked it. And I did real well.”

Tim didn’t say anything, but his head was tipped to the side, listening carefully.

Jason kept going. He hated the silence. “And, to tell you the truth, I liked the medievalists more than Shakespeare. Beowulf, and Chaucer, and Dante, type stuff. And Arthurian legends. That was the good stuff . . . I had a teacher introduce me to a professor who specialized in writings from the Middle Ages. That guy was the smartest fuckin’ guy I think I’ve ever met. He’d goddamn read everything on earth. Nearly impossible understand, though, and he looked like a big fat tortoise. He wanted me to . . . attend the university where he worked. Not even to study literature, if I didn’t want to. We just sort of . . . got along, you know?”

They had. And Jason had thought about looking him up, after he had emerged from his Pit-induced rage. In the end, he had decided against it. He hadn’t been able to bear the thought of what wizened, quirky Professor Collins would think of the man he had turned into, when he had known the bright young thing that Jason had been once, an entire lifetime ago.

Bruce had thought Professor Collins was hilarious. He and Jason had played a game of chess and talked late into the night about whether or not Jason would want to go to college where Professor Collins was employed, and whether or not Jason did want to major in literature.

Options. One of the things Jason missed most about his old life was knowing that he'd had options.

Tim said, "Did you want to go to college?"

Jason said, after a long minute, "Yeah."

"Do you still want to go to college?"

Jason made a disdainful sound through his nose. "Oh, yeah. Those transcripts are gonna be glowing. Once-dead Gothamite vigilante."

Tim was quiet. When Jason glanced over at him, he had a focused, furrowed look on his face, like he was carefully digesting everything Jason had just told him.

"Okay," he said after another few minutes, and Jason bristled immediately, ready for whatever biting analysis Tim was about to stab him with.

What Tim said was, "So what was your favorite of the medievalists?"

"I . . . oh." Jason blinked, and thought about it. "Well, I mean. Beowulf is by far the best, obviously . . ."

They talked. Jason ignored the ever-growing hunger pangs, and knew Tim was doing the same. They drank the last of their water. Another hour turned. Then another.

Then their tunnel yawned wide, wide open, into an impossibly enormous cavern.

It was lit from somewhere—where, impossible to tell. It was a blue twilight sort of light, and it shone down on crags and cliffs and rocky valleys, all rippling and tumbling over each other. Multiple waterfalls gushed down into the valley, and dense blue-green shrubbery shrouded the ground. Ropes of dark purple flowers tumbled over the rocks, lacing the thick midnight-blue moss that clung heavily to the crags.

"Damn," said Tim, sounding badly impressed. Jason just heaved a big

breath, some of the tension loosening from his shoulders as the feeling of claustrophobia eased.

Tim began to scramble down into the valley. It was a precarious descent, and some of it was done sliding on their asses. Moss was slippery.

As they reached the bottom and began hiking over the uneven terrain, a sound began to be audible over the rushing of the water.

Tim glanced back at Jason, his eyebrows lifting, expression saying, *Do you hear that?*

Jason jerked his head and moved one of his own eyebrows. *Yeah. Shh.*

Tim rolled his eyes, but they hiked along in silence, Jason's eyes flashing around them. It was lush and rolling with plantlife, and it should have been a deep relief from the tunnels, but Jason was becoming more aware by the moment that it would be impossibly easy for something to be hiding behind any one of the buckling rocks.

It was singing. The sound. The words weren't audible, but it was definitely a woman's voice singing.

It was a testament to how much bullshit Jason had been through in the last few days that he barely noticed it after a little while.

They began to reach the bases of the waterfalls. The pools of water were crystal clear, and Jason's mouth felt more and more parched with every one they passed.

Tim must have felt the same, because after a while, he stopped by one to talk to Jason where the waterfall would muffle his voice from any eavesdroppers. "Think it's safe to drink?"

Jason eyed the water. His head was starting to feel swimmy from the lack of food and water. "I think we have to risk it. We'll start experiencing dehydration if we keep going longer."

"The water *is* safe to drink. I think this is a break for you."

Jason closed his eyes and said, voice tight, "If there's a fucking ghost behind me—"

Tim let out a short, irritated breath. "You're going to do what. Exactly. Yell at it?"

“Sorry,” said the woman behind them. When Jason looked around, he found her sitting on a rock by the water, knees curled and ankles crossed.

Unlike the other ghosts, this one looked perfectly ordinary—from their time. She was young, twenties, perhaps, with white-blond hair that had dark roots peaking through. She had on a yellow blouse tucked into brown pants. She was looking at Jason and Tim like they were guests she’d forgotten were coming, and couldn’t quite place if she knew them or not.

“The water is fine,” she repeated, shaking herself a bit. She had the lilt of a London accent. The reflection of the water sent white ripples across her face. She put her thumb at her lower lip, worrying at it; her eyes looked only half-focused. “I don't know if this means you’re far or not. This is . . . I’ve never done this bit before.”

“Which bit?” asked Tim. His voice was efficient and controlled, giving nothing away. His Bat-persona.

“Seeing others come through. You’re my first.”

Jason said, “First what.”

She seemed to focus a little. Looking at Jason, she said, “The first contenders I’ve seen. I was the last one.”

Jason found, after examining this particular statement, that he did not care for it a bit. He said, struggling to remember the exact time frame Rhea had given them, “You’re . . . you lost. Seven years ago?”

“Yeah,” she said, with a light shrug. She looked over Jason’s shoulder, staring into nothing. “I didn’t do too badly, actually. I made it about three-fourths of the way through, which is farther than a lot of people get, apparently. Before he won. The man.”

Tim asked, “You died seven years ago?”

The woman glared at Tim. “No,” she said, sharp and instant.

“So you’re not a ghost?” said Jason. “Well, at least—”

“That isn’t what I said,” said the woman. She seemed to grapple within herself, as though she had forgotten how to speak in complete thoughts. “I’m not dead. I’m not, ” she added, mostly to herself.

Shaking her head a little, she gestured around. “The Labyrinth gave me this place. To stay. I could make it something else, but I like this, I think.” She trailed off, and her gaze moved to the waterfall, watching as it fell into the pool.

“Jesus,” muttered Jason, with revulsion, “Christ.”

Tim stared at the woman, eyes gallowed. After a long pause in which he assembled what he wanted to say, he asked, “Are you going to hurt us?”

It was a simple question, nearly idiotic. Jason glanced at her, waiting for the answer.

The woman stared at the water.

“I could,” she said, after a long time. “I could make this water so big it would swallow you. I could make the rocks fall down on top of you.” She stared up and around, expression considering. “Like the others.”

Tim and Jason waited.

She lowered her eyes to them.

“No,” she said, after a long pause. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

Tim and Jason glanced at each other.

After a long minute, they both went to the pool of water. They dropped their backpacks, and pulled out their water bottles.

“Your name,” said Jason, looking at the woman. “What is it?”

She had to think for a moment. An uncomfortably long moment.

Finally, she said, “Marion. My name is Marion.”

* * *

They guzzled water. It wasn’t food, but their survival chances for the next seventy-two hours had just jumped considerably. Jason was tired enough that he almost didn’t care.

His stomach twisted sharply, pointedly, and Jason winced. *Almost.*

In silence, he and Tim set up their small camp. There simply wasn’t enough of anything dry to make a fire, but the cavern wasn’t precisely

dark or cold, so they didn't bother.

Jason caught Tim eyeing Marion more than once.

Jason understood. She made Jason decidedly uncomfortable, too. She alternated between staring at Tim, staring at Jason, and staring at her own reflection in the water. She gave all three the same puzzled, far away gaze, as though she remembered seeing them at the first round of a party but by the second round had forgotten their names.

The third time she performed this circuit, Tim looked at Jason and flicked his eyes pointedly at Marion. Jason shrugged and twirled his pointer finger around his ear, which made Tim roll his eyes.

Wandering over to the adjacent pool, Jason stripped off his jacket.

"What are you doing?"

"Why are you whispering?" countered Jason, pulling off his shirt. "I'm taking a bath, Drake. Some of us don't like to smell like eu de lakewater."

"I don't smell like lakewater."

"Yes, you do. And you can continue to smell like it for all I care. Some of us are civilized."

He finished stripping and sank into the water.

"That," Jason observed, sinking in up to his neck, "is fucking cold."

Tim reached over and put his hand in the water to test the temperature. "Yeah, I don't really feel like—"

After that he was too busy spluttering, because Jason had lashed out, quick as a snake, and shoved Tim into the water.

"You're welcome," Jason said breezily, swimming away from Tim's retaliatory punches. "Now you don't smell like lakewater."

Tim cursed him several more times and waded out of the pool, sopping wet and grumbling to himself. Jason smirked and finished his bath in peace.

When he waded back out and dressed, Marion was nowhere in sight. Tim just shrugged when Jason asked him about it.

After that, there was nothing to do but indulge the exhaustion in his bones. Jason settled down into his sleeping bag, put his back to Tim, and closed his eyes.

He shifted. He shifted again. And again.

It didn't work. Sleep was elusive. Nothing could chase Dick's dying face away, or Roy's, or his mother's. It was impossible to sleep when that sick, awful dread kept turning his stomach over and over in on itself.

Half an hour later, he was still not asleep. There was nothing around to dull the anxiety.

Tim said, voice sharp and low, "Whatever you're doing, stop it."

Jason was about to say something snappish in response when the ghost's voice answered Tim. "I wasn't."

"Yes you were. Leave him alone."

Jason held very still.

There was a second of silence.

Marion said, "He tried . . . to kill you. I can see it. Why are you traveling with him?"

"Oh, you know. Family. What do you mean you can see it? How do the . . . ghosts, or whatever, how do you see? Can you read our minds?"

"I'm not a ghost," said Marion.

Tim didn't say anything, but Jason could feel his skepticism.

After a little while, Marion said, "Over the years I've become . . . different. I can see things. Your things. The bad things. I can see . . ." Her voice changed. "Your father's anger. The day Bane broke Bruce Wayne's back. King Snake. Ra's Al Ghul. The Council of Spiders and the battle you lost . . . "

"Yes, all right," said Tim curtly. "I don't need a biography of my own life, thank you."

She continued in the same dreamy, knowing tone. "All the times Jason and Damian tried to hurt you. And it did hurt, didn't it? Because the

others defended them . . . And," she added, in a surprised sort of way, "oh. The loneliness. The alone-ness. I wouldn't know how to create that."

Tim said, in a voice that said that he was struggling to keep to the point, "What. What do you mean, *create it?"*

"Reflect it," she said, "Back at you. Because I could become . . . "

"*Stop* it," said Tim.

Jason sat up and turned around.

"All right," Jason said, a dangerous snap to his voice. "What does a guy have to do to get sleep around here?"

Tim was rolled up into a crouch, keen and poised for a fight. Marion looked at Jason, surprised.

"Well, I was only . . . I was only . . ." she faded off, and her eyes stared over Jason's shoulder at nothing.

Jason glanced over his shoulder, just to be sure it was nothing. He exchanged a look with Tim.

Balancing his elbows on his knees, Tim said to Marion, "Do you know who *you* are?"

It took her a long time to answer. When she did, her voice was quiet. "Sometimes."

"Where did you come from?"

There was another long, grasping silence. Something like panic crept over Marion's face.

Jason closed his eyes. God, he knew that feeling. He knew that feeling so well it might as well have been him struggling with his own foggy, fractured memory. Out of habit, he ran through his memories like he ran his tongue over his teeth to check they were all still there: Dick's face. Roy's face. Alfred's. The Manor. The batcave. Bruce. They were all there. He still had them.

In the beginning, after the Pit, the memories had been malleable and distant, someone else's life. It had taken a long, long time for them to come back properly.

“Wimbledon,” she said at last. “That’s where I was born. I lived in London. Before all this.” She paused. “I wasn’t a good person.”

This was said with a grim kind of certainty.

Tim said, “Why are you still here? Even though you’re . . . dying?”

“Because I can be. I can stay here forever.”

Tim said, “Is that what you want?”

Her jaw flexed. Clenched. She looked straight at Tim, and her voice was crystal-clear, eyes furious, when she answered, “Someone should pay for this.”

Jason knew that, too.

“It won’t help,” he told her.

Marion swivelled to him. “What won’t?”

“Trying to make other people pay,” he said. “It won’t help.”

She opened her mouth, probably to say something like “What the hell do you know,” or “fuck off,” or possibly “you have great hair,” but she closed it soon after, because, as Jason was sure she knew after poking around in his head, he knew an awful lot about trying to make people pay.

Jason wasn’t sure what possessed him, but he said, “Can you see one thing? In the house that you grew up in?”

She stared at him like he was insane.

“A piece of furniture,” Jason insisted, aware that he sounded insane, but also confident that it would work. Dinah had come up with this for him. “A table. Your bed. Something you held a lot.”

It took her a moment, but she answered him eventually. “The walls,” she said. “Of one room. They were blue.”

“What did the rest of the room look like?”

She paused. Stared into the water.

“It was a living room,” she said, the ripples reflecting on her skin. “Blue furniture. It was all blue because when my sister redid the house

. . . she . . .”

Her mouth opened, and then closed again. She had seen something that she knew; had closed her hand around a memory that had stayed solid.

And Jason knew that too.

Marion looked at Jason, her eyes horrified.

“My . . . I left . . . I left her,” she said. “She’ll never know.”

Between one blink and the next, she disappeared.

Jason pushed himself back into his sleeping bag, muttering something about ghosts to fill the silence. He felt deeply unnerved.

It took exactly two seconds for Tim to ask, “How did you know to ask those questions?” because apparently he was completely incapable of going more a minute without asking something.

Jason thought about a multitude of answers he could give, most of which were filled with an impressive amount of swear words and exactly where Tim could shove his questions. But then he thought about Tim’s face after his father had appeared, and the way Tim’s talking had been enough to distract him for the past few hours from the bridge. Tim sitting with his back against Jason’s during his panic attack. The way Tim had said *Oh, you know. Family.* Like he, too, had realized that in order to keep something he couldn’t lose, he would have to put up with a significant degree of unpleasantness.

Jason said, “Because it happened to me.”

“What did?”

“Well, if you were capable of not talking for a single second, I would tell you,” said Jason testily. He did not care for this part of his life, and talking about it seemed to close the distance he had put between himself and it. “When . . .”

Jason stopped. Heaved a deep sigh. He didn’t know why he was telling Tim Drake this, but he did anyway.

“You already know,” he said, suddenly unspeakably tired. The anger would come later to comfort him, but now, he was simply wrung out. He did not look at Tim. “Everybody knows, fuck it all to hell. After

they . . . dunked me in that green sludge, it was like I was a clean slate. Physically, and . . ." He struggled to explain without telling Tim how horrifying it was, how they had *unraveled* him. “I didn’t have the rest of me. My memories. I was like that.” He clenched his teeth against a wave of fury, of grief. “Like her. And they…they used that. They *used* that I didn’t have my memories to manipulate me like some sort of—clay figure. To . . . change things in the past, so that I remembered them wrong. They reached into my head and twisted things around, muddled stuff that should have just been fact.”

He worked his jaw. “Especially things with. You know. Bruce. Dick. Alfred. It was all wrong. So when I started getting the other memories, the good ones . . . I had to find something that I knew. An object. A place. I could work my way out from there, if I could remember one thing . . .”

Even now, memories would sometimes pop up that he hadn’t been able to find before. Tim had broken through another one by talking about the Batmobile. It was like somebody breaking glass, and then all of a sudden, Jason could see a memory that had been blocked off by his time in the grave and his time with the League. It had happened an overwhelming amount when he’d first gotten back to Gotham—memories pouring in like sand through a sieve—and in his first six months, he’d had no idea what was true and what was false.

The memory was filmy around the edges, and Jason probed at it, trying to get it to solidify. The first—no, third? —time Jason had tried stealing the Batmobile . . . Dick had been there, and instead of snitching to B, Dick had taken him out, taught him to drive it . . . “Jason, *watch it,* this is not your grandmother’s old minivan, be *careful* . . .*”* but he had been laughing. Something vanilla poked at his senses . . . ice cream, maybe . . .?

He gave up, rubbing at his temples, feeling a headache coming on. He could never force them. It was like trying to pull a tooth too soon. It would come eventually.

Jason took a breath. Continued. “But that took a while, because I didn’t get the other memories back until I came back here. They did that on purpose, because if I’d popped out of the Pit with everything intact, I would have just . . .”

He had to stop, because sometimes the what-ifs swallowed him. If he’d just been able to *go home.* If he’d just been able to walk right back into the Manor, not even a year after he’d been killed. His life would have

been difficult to reassemble, but it wouldn't have been like now. It wouldn't have been completely impossible.

The Joker is still alive, reminded a vicious, quiet voice inside of him, and the ugly shock from seeing him on the bridge snagged like a fish hook in his throat. *You still wouldn't have been avenged.*

A different, much newer part of him, the part that was clumsily trying, said *But it would have been something.*

". . . gone home?" finished Tim, when Jason didn't go on. "I always wondered," he said, voice very cautious again. "I wondered why . . .you stayed away for so long."

Those lost years clawed up through the past, and with them, that cradling, burning anger. It almost relieved Jason. "Yeah, well. When you remember things wrong and you find out everybody fucking screwed you over anyway, you wouldn't be in a big hurry to go home, either."

When Tim was silent, Jason looked over at him. Tim had what Jason was beginning to call 'Tim's thinking face' on. It was a furrowed, focused sort of look, like he was devoting his entire attention to dissecting every aspect of what Jason had just said, from any and all possible angles.

Jason didn't care for it just then. There was a good deal of hurt that was lurking around Jason's surly tone, and he was suddenly afraid that Tim could see it where nobody else could, except for maybe Dick on occasion, and sometimes Dinah during therapy.

Jason severely disliked feeling at a disadvantage, and despite Tim's admission in the tunnels, he realized he didn't know a lot about Tim Drake, whereas Tim Drake knew an awful lot about him. Jason knew the basics from files and a lot of observation: that Tim was more brains than brawn, cagey and astute where Dick was intuitive and graceful, where Damian was quick and decisive, where Jason was active and concentrated, the way an explosive was.

It nettled him sometimes, how much they complimented each other. How well they worked together, when rare necessity compelled it. The four Wayne boys.

You are not a Wayne.

A little unfairly, he said, "All right. I took a turn, and now it's yours."

Tim blinked out of his complete focus. “What?”

Jason said, “What was up with your dad?”

Something shuttered in Tim’s expression. “This is the part where I tell you *you’re* not authorized to access that information.”

Jason could put it together anyway. Pavlos had only jeered Tim’s dad’s face once, given a hint of anger, and Tim’s immediate instinct had been to *get away*, even though he was swinging hundreds of feet in the air. Jason had grown up in the streets. He knew the rest of that story.

“What about your mom?” Jason tilted his head.

Tim stared out over the valley and didn’t answer, something distant and cool on his face.

Jason was about to turn over and try to sleep again when Tim said coolly, “She died. She was poisoned, along with my dad.”

Jason rolled over onto his stomach. “Your parents were poisoned?”

Tim shook his head, once. He still wasn’t looking at anything in particular, which made the moment strange, because Tim was always laser-focused. “It didn’t kill my dad. It just . . . put him in a coma for a while.”

“What a fun Robin origin story,” said Jason.

Tim’s gaze snapped to him, and he gave Jason a withering look. “Whatever. And it wasn’t like she . . . anyway. I don’t think Marion is coming back tonight.”

Tim shifted away, putting his back to Jason, pointedly finishing the conversation.

Jason didn't let him. “She what?”

“What?”

“It wasn’t like she what.”

Jason was ragging on Tim just to rag on him at that point, putting off going to sleep, so it threw him for a loop when Tim said flatly, “It wasn’t like she liked me very much.”

Jason opened his mouth to say something, then closed it again.

The set of Tim's shoulders was very remote, curled.

"Not," added Tim, still with his back to Jason, "that it mattered. They were busy people. I never saw them. I think having a child was just a box they checked because it was something people did." He laughed a little, a quick, self-deprecating sound, and his shoulders purposefully squared themselves. "Anyway. They're dead now, so."

Jason said, "How old were you when she died?"

"Twelve. You should get some sleep."

For a moment, Jason saw it, all lined up in an analytical, graph-like way, the way he evaluated his opponents: Being twelve and knowing you were an afterthought with a dead mother. A jeering, overpowerful father. Marion wondering aloud about Tim's alone-ness. The fact that Tim's brutally quick, factual sentences might also be disguising a good deal of hurt.

He thought about Bruce taking in another neglected twelve-year-old, and he remembered— being twelve, snappish and clever and lonely. Being offered something that he had never had before.

Jason looked at Tim's shoulders and still felt the old fury filling the old wound with blood. It was just that now, he also felt sort of like he was looking in a mirror.

Which sucked.

"I can't sleep," said Jason.

"Sucks to be you," said Tim, unruffled and cool again.

"I can take my shift."

"Well, I can't sleep either."

". . . should we keep moving?"

It took Tim longer to respond. "No," he finally said, low. "I can't . . I don't think I can do . . . any more of it. Right now."

Jason thought about going back up against whatever the Labyrinth was going to throw at them and shuddered.

“All right,” said Jason. “Me either.” He paused. He was done asking questions about Tim, but he didn’t want to be alone with his own thoughts for hours until he fell asleep.

“Bullshit thing that happened to you in the last three weeks,” he said.

This was enough to startle a soft laugh out of Tim. “Dick plays that with you too, huh?”

“Sure does.” Jason paused. “When did he start doing that, by the way?”

“More like *why.”* Tim shifted so he was half-facing Jason, expression exasperatedly fond in the strange blue light. “Damian. If it was a competition, the little gremlin would actually tell Dick things about his life before us so Dick would be able to connect with him better. Also his bullshit meter is even more fucked than ours, so it helped Bruce and Dick figure out how to help him, you know.”

“The League will do that to you,” Jason remarked, smirking at the thought of the stories Damian would have had. “Anyway, I said go.”

Tim thought. “Two weeks ago, Bart decided that he wanted to steal an entire truck full of Coke products…”

The thing about Jason and Tim was that they had the same sense of humor. Jason had always hated this, but that night, buried far underground in an alternate dimension, after telling four stories between the two of them and laughing for an hour, it helped him sleep.

* * *

For the first time in a very long time, Rhea was baffled.

She knew the Labyrinth’s moods. Its caprice. She’d learned to navigate them all, to deal with her own nightmares and old horrors over and over and over again.

But now, something was *happening* to the Labyrinth. And it wasn’t getting worse. In fact, if she hadn’t known better, she would have said that it was . . .

But she did know better. She did. And just because the tunnels weren’t as purposefully frightening or twisted, just because there seemed to be fewer ghosts, just because Silia seemed distracted, just because . . .

It couldn't be. It couldn't.

She knew the boys were still alive. Still traveling through the depths of the Labyrinth. She wondered why they hadn't killed each other yet. The Labyrinth would have made it easy. Would have encouraged it, in fact. It had to be only a matter of time.

She kept moving. It didn't matter. It was a trick, it had to be.

But the night Jason Todd and Tim Drake spent in companionable laughter, the night a particular kind of human warmth that had never been felt in the Labyrinth before was present, Rhea found flowers.

She inspected them for a very long time, more unnerved and more frightened the more she looked. They weren't poisonous. Or carnivorous. Or dangerous in any way. They were just . . . flowers. Clusters of purple violets, growing velvety soft and healthy despite the complete lack of light.

After a long time, she reached out and touched them, their petals gentle against her fingers, cut open after her last battle with Silia. Blood smeared the delicate membranes.

She took a few of them with her. Anything good was rare down here. She was going to take what she could get, even if she didn't know why.

Another layer undid itself from the Labyrinth. Another heartstring unfurled.

Rhea very nearly heard it, and she held very still, listening, her eyes darting uneasily around the tunnels.

In the end, she kept walking, the only thing she knew how to do.

More flowers opened behind her, and somewhere between blossoms, a ghost long sleeping opened her eyes.

Chapter 6

Jason woke up a lot of hours later and rolled over, his mouth full of cotton, and winced; his stomach was a shriveled, nauseous mess inside of him.

Tim was across from him, tipped sideways against a round boulder in what had to be wildly uncomfortable, mouth open in the unselfconscious slumber of the exhausted.

Jason felt a flash of annoyance that Tim hadn't woken him for his shift, but no blood no foul, so he decided to let it be. He hiked around for a bit on the mossy rocks, always keeping the camp in sight. Mist coated his hair and clothes.

He found the way out astonishingly easily: there was a large cave tunnel on the opposite side of where they'd come in, maybe five or six miles off.

There still wasn't any food, however, which did not improve his mood, so he headed back to camp.

On the way, something heavy settled on him: the undeniable feeling of being watched.

The hair on the back of his neck stood up. He looked around.

His younger self, perched nimbly on a rock, stared back.

"And what exactly," said Jason, slow and derisive to remind himself that he was in control, "do you want?"

The younger version of himself said in a voice that had once been his, "Nothing. I can't want anything, I'm not real."

The exasperation was his. The thicker accent. It was real Twilight Zone shit, and it was sending creepy-crawlies all up Jason's spine.

"You're some weird fucked up illusion," agreed Jason, moving away.

The young Jason eyed him and said instead, "You didn't take the door."

Jason stared at him uncomprehendingly, then remembered the door in the cabin when Tim had been getting strangled by a sea monster.

He said witheringly, “Don’t be fucking ridiculous.”

“I’m not,” said young Jason. “It would have put you ahead of Rhea.”

Jason went very still. “Don’t,” he repeated, “be fucking ridiculous.”

The young Jason looked at him and glared stubbornly. For one second, Jason understood what it was like to be Bruce Wayne, circa five or six years ago.

“What are you,” said Jason. “Really.”

The young Jason said, with six or seven voices leaking out of his mouth at once, “What once was, and can never be again.”

Jason blinked.

There were only mossy rocks. Waterfalls hissed peacefully around him.

He went back to camp to change clothes, brush his teeth, and shake off the deep sense of foreboding nesting inside of him.

Tim woke up somewhere between the last two tasks.

“Good thing we didn’t fucking die, Sleeping Beauty,” Jason told him around his toothbrush, spitting toothpaste on the ground. He didn’t mention his younger self. It had probably just been some weird ghost wearing his face to fuck with him.

Tim just scowled at him, rolling his neck, and stumbled off into the rocks somewhere.

Jason stretched for a bit, packed up his side of camp, and drank water. He was going to get as much water as humanly possible inside of him before refilling his water bottle when they left.

Tim came back with damp hair and a change of clothes on. “Come look at this.”

Jason eyed him around another gulp of water. “It better not be some fuckin’ monster, or whatever.”

Tim gave him a look.

“Fine. Whatever. I’m coming. If I get maimed even slightly, I will shove you over a waterfall.”

Tim let him to a smaller, completely circular pool of water that had no waterfall feeding into it. Moss coated the edges, with tiny purple blossoms clinging to the slick rock faces.

It looked too small for something scaly and tentacle-y to burst out and eat him, but Jason was careful to stay further away from it and peered in.

The surface of the water was flickering like TV static, caught oddly between channels. A confusing mirage of images flashed across it: streets freshly plowed with piles of snow alongside, empty store windows, richly lit rooms with ghostly people laughing soundlessly at each other, plates piled high with food.

A moment later, the laughter reached them, faint, like the television was turned down.

“Remember when we met Silia, and we saw Gotham?” Tim asked, leaning over next to Jason. “Do you think . . . this is like that?”

Jason didn’t answer. His eyes had snagged on the Christmas tree that the pool had shown them for a moment before flickering away.

“What . . . day do you think it is?” he asked, voice strange to his own ears.

“Um.” Tim hesitated. “Well, we’ve . . .”

There was a long silence as Tim thought, and looked at his watch.

“I don’t know,” he said finally. “We’ve been here for between four and five days, I think?”

Jason didn’t care. He didn’t.

“I think that means it’s Christmas,” he said, turning away from the pool, voice acerbic.

Tim didn’t move. When Jason looked back at him, Tim was looking in the pool, mouth thin. He wasn’t the type to cry—none of them were—but just then his face looked worse than crying.

Jason muscled down the grief. He hadn’t been planning on spending Christmas there *anyway,* what was the *problem*—

“Come on,” said Jason. “Come on. The sooner we get out of here, the sooner we can—” *go home*— “beg Alfred to make his Christmas

focaccia bread again even if it's not Christmas."

"Ugh," said Tim. "Don't bring up bread right now. I might die."

"Think he'll make an exception? 'Hi Alfred, we're so sorry, you see, we were getting eaten by an alternate dimension monster—'"

Tim snorted. "He'd make an exception for *you.* Just don't ask him to make waffles. I hate his waffles."

"Because they're too dry and they taste like napkins." Jason pointed at him triumphantly. "I *knew* I wasn't the only person who felt that way."

"Did you ever tell him?"

Jason made a scandalized noise. "Don't be fucking ridiculous."

Tim got quiet again. "Do you think . . ." he turned back to the pool.

"That thing is a broken screen," said Jason. "We don't even know if we're looking at *Gotham* anymore."

"You could," said Marion, right by Jason's ear, startling him half to death.

Jason moved six feet away from her in less than a second and swore copiously at her. "Are you—would you fucking *stop* doing that?"

Marion walked over to the pool, hands in her pockets. Just then, she looked very, very alive. Her eyes were less dreamy, but now, there was grief in her shoulders. "You could ask the Labyrinth for it. For your family." She shrugged, a weary movement. "Everybody who passes through here wants that, in the end. Just to see them one more time. Keep in mind, though. The Labyrinth never does anything out of charity." She looked Jason in the eyes. "You might regret it."

Tim was quiet, looking at Jason. Waiting. He was tense, face masked.

Jason knew Tim wanted it as much as he did, so he said, "Knock yourself out," in his most surly voice.

Tim turned back to the pool.

After a second, Jason said, "Well?"

Dick's voice answered him. "Come here, Dames."

Jason was next to Tim in a second, without remembering how he'd gotten there.

It was the living room of the manor. The Christmas tree towered over everything, magnificent and cheerful, swathed in gently twinkling lights and ornaments and shimmering ribbons. Piles of wrapped presents tumbled over each other at the base of it. A fire crackled in the grate, and the curtains were opened onto the Manor grounds, where snow fell, slow and lovely, over the already-white world outside.

Jason lowered himself down to sit next to Tim. He didn't think either of them were breathing.

Dick was sitting in an overstuffed armchair by the fire, leaning forward, eyes on someone neither of them could see. White bandages peaked out from his dark sweater at his neckline. There was a bruise on the side of his face.

Titus trotted into frame, tail wagging. He presented his head to Dick, who scratched behind his ears, still looking off somewhere into where Jason knew the hallway was.

"I know you're mad," continued Dick heavily. "But Tim and Jason wouldn't want you to be out there on Christmas Day, either."

It was Christmas Day. They had been inside this hellhole for four days.

A long silence. Damian came into frame, face viciously unhappy, and sat down on the floor beside Titus. Titus promptly dropped the front half of his body into Damian's lap, snuffling lovingly.

"It isn't fair," said Damian. "And I'm not doing Christmas without them."

Tim's knuckles were white on the rock. Jason sort of felt like someone had punctured his lung with how much he wanted to be there, and not here.

"It's just dinner, Damian," promised Dick quietly, running his fingers through Damian's hair. Damian pulled away, and Dick dropped his hands back into his lap. He stared unseeingly outside, and just then, he looked much older than he was.

Pulling himself together visibly, Dick gave Damian a smile that didn't

reach his eyes. “You could open a few presents, if you wanted to,” he coaxed Damian.

“None from Timothy,” said Damian immediately, but the idea of presents had visibly piqued him. “He said he had something in particular for me, and I don’t want to open one without him.”

Tim and Jason watched as Dick handed a present to Damian, and Damian began to unwrap it.

Dick met the eyes of someone out of sight again, and Bruce walked into frame, a cup of coffee in his hand. There were dark circles under his eyes, but he managed a small smile for Dick and Damian as he lowered himself into the chair opposite Dick.

Another memory superimposed itself over Jason’s eyes: another Christmas, years ago; the same Christmas tree, the same snow, Bruce and Dick in those same chairs, smiling warmly as Jason opened his presents, laughing in delight—

Something deep inside of Jason twisted painfully. The anger had once again abandoned him, and now he just ached, and something that felt terribly like regret had begun to curl uncomfortably in his stomach.

Damian was thanking Bruce, still looking away, purposefully aloof. He was trying to look haughty, but there was too much anxiety hanging around his eyes.

Cass wandered in and plopped herself down next to Damian. Damian scowled, rubbing his hands over Titus’ ears.

They all just sat there for a minute, every single one of them pretending not to be sad for the benefit of everyone else.

“They’re smart,” Cass said to Damian, tipping her head. Her hair swished down over her ears. “Fast. Home soon.”

Dick’s chest moved as he let out a careful breath through his mouth, his hands locked around each other.

A vicious shudder ran through Tim, and Jason knew the same realization had crashed around his ears, too: what their family must have thought. What *he* would have thought. Four days with no contact, not a word, and probably no leads.

Damian’s face twisted. He stood up abruptly and left, Titus trotting

along happily behind him.

Jason turned away from the pool. He'd seen enough. He wanted to leave.

Tim didn't move, still watching, hands clenched, like he wanted to reach through the pool to their home.

"Come on, Tim," said Jason, voice unfamiliar to his own ears. "Tim. Come on."

Marion's voice ghosted in his ear, mostly insubstantial. *I told you.*

"Is Barbara coming over?" Jason heard Bruce ask Dick.

"She's bringing Steph around eight," Dick answered. "Steph will want to know we've exhausted *every* option, Bruce."

There was a tired note of wariness in Dick's voice that Jason didn't understand.

"Jason wouldn't have," said Cass. "Been through this."

Every single vein in Jason's body froze.

"We've looked," said Bruce, sounding exhausted. "If Stephanie doesn't believe us, she can go through all the channels herself again."

"Is Clark coming?" Dick.

Jason almost didn't hear Bruce's affirmative because his anger had reappeared all at once, a violent flood of relieving, comforting rage, clearing him of his consuming grief.

"Well, then, we'd better tell Alfred—"

There was a decisive, pointed splash.

Jason looked. Tim was standing, brushing himself off, the water rippling with the rock he'd thrown in.

He picked up his pack, eyes streaked, and walked away.

Jason hated him. He followed him anyway. They left the pool behind and started their trek toward the other cave tunnel. They didn't see Marion, so Jason forgot about her.

It didn't take long for Jason to descend into a truly foul mood. He had a pounding headache above his left eye, his stomach was an unruly, upset mess inside of him, and he was so angry he could have cracked stone.

His head was a battlefield. Each time he shoved one thought away, a new one arose, each as vicious and acidic as the one before. The pointless want that came with thinking about that living room. Christmas of six years ago. The fact that they thought he'd done something to Tim. Every Christmas since six years ago, desperately wishing he was at the Manor, desperately wishing it would burn to the ground. The fact that they thought he'd done something to Tim. The fact that Tim's presence was probably the missed one, *the fact that they thought after fucking everything he had done to pull himself up that he had done something to Tim—*

The terrain became more rocky, forcing them to climb down into precarious holes pockmarked with pointed stones and back up out of them; took them around jagged rocks buckled up out of the earth; occasionally through narrow streams and shallow pools of water. Most of it was uphill.

Jason tried to focus on his body, on the physical exertion, on his hunger, on dismantling his fury like his therapist had taught him—but his fury would not be dismantled. He burned with it; it only grew as they walked; he was bleeding inwardly, and trying to amputate where it hurt; anger blew through the hurt, choking him with it. Tim's back in front of him, his eternally steadfast, unbothered silence, made it worse. Jason wanted to kill him. Jason did not want to kill him, Tim was just in the blasting zone. He shrieked inside pointlessly, railing at an imaginary Dick, at an imaginary Bruce. *After everything, after all that I've done, after everything I've been through, and you have the fucking nerve to* doubt *me, how DARE you, I'll fucking—*

Jason barely noticed when they came to a point where they could take a path that would take them out of their way, or climb up an uneven rock face.

Tim sighed, and Jason hated that too. "Okay. Your turn. Which way —"

Jason interrupted coldly, "I don't care."

Tim looked at him, hearing the change in his voice. There was that analyzation, the narrowed, focused look.

“Stop fucking looking at me,” Jason growled at him. “I don’t fucking care.”

After a moment of thought, Tim easily hit the nail on the head. “They didn’t mean that,” he said. “None of them really think you did anything to me. It’s just . . . being thorough.”

This incensed Jason further. It was terrible, feeling known by someone you loathed. “Like *hell* it was. And I don’t give a fuck. Just *pick* a direction, Drake, Jesus.”

Tim did not pick a direction, narrowing his eyes at Jason. Jason was dangerously close to punching him.

“Why do you do that?” Tim said finally, and Jason’s fists curled. “Why do you pretend like you don’t care? I was *there* back there*,* in case you don’t remember. I have eyes.”

“Just because we had one little cute talk together doesn’t mean we’re *friends,* Drake,” said Jason, dangerous as a viper. “It doesn’t mean that I don’t still want to dangle you off a cliff and then drop you.”

Tim threw up his hands. “What’s the point of this! What’s the *point?* What’s the point of you pretending like you don’t give a fuck about your own family—”

“*You* are not my *family,”* snarled Jason. “You’re just some idiotic kid who waltzed into my life and took it, and then once your usefulness was over, somebody *else* took it. How did that feel, by the way? Pretty fucking shitty, I’ll bet.”

Tim didn’t flinch, but something simmered to life in his eyes. Jason saw it with an ugly twist of satisfaction—good, someone *else* was angry and hurting for a change—

“I didn’t try to murder Damian to prove a damn point, or whatever the *hell* it was that you were trying to do, you psychopath,” snapped Tim. “You hate me for no good reason—”

“You were *in my house with my dad* while they were *scrambling my brains like spaghetti.”* The rage owned him. “You even *look* like me! And you put on *my* suit and you—”

“And how the HELL is that MY FAULT!” Tim was shouting back at him, getting up into his face, fearless even though they both knew how a physical fight would end. “I lived in your *shadow* is what I did,

I could never be what you were no matter what I did; *you,* Bruce's favorite, lost son—"

It was an eerie echo of the fight they had had years ago among the memorials and statues—but this time it was worse, this time they knew where to punch, this time Jason did not have the excuse of being Pit-mad, and this time Jason was *hurting* —

"Bruce *forgot about me,"* hissed Jason, and the rage couldn't subdue his pain. "Bruce took you in and left me behind and *fuck* you for taking them. FUCK you, *they were all I had!"*

There was a beat of silence, but Tim's mouth twisted, eyes turbulent; this fight was somehow terrible in its intensity, and how could that be, Jason was not supposed to care—

"Nobody *forgot about you,"* said Tim, and there was furious desperation now, "nobody, not a single person, and—it *isn't* my *fault,* I didn't *know* —"

"Fuck *off,* I *know,"* snarled Jason.

Another quick instant of quiet, and then ferocious incredulity stole across Tim's face. "You *know* ?" Anger. "You KNOW? Then why the hell have we been doing *this* —" he gestured wildly at the space between them, like the hatred was a palpable thing.

"Because you're *fine,"* yelled Jason. "You'll always be fine, you'll always have that life—"

"Oh, yeah, I'll always be fine, with Bruce's other sons trying to kill me at every turn, and nobody giving a damn," sneered Tim. In an instant, it was desperation again. "I already lost! I've already lost, I already *know* that if Bruce had a chance to sacrifice me to get you back he'd do it in a *heartbeat.* Okay! And you don't even *care!* Everybody wants you home—"

"*No,* they want some *dead kid home.* And I'm *not him.*" It was all encompassing, whatever was happening inside of him, and it felt less like venting anger and more like being ripped open. The world shuddered.

Tim whirled on him. "Nobody cares! It's *you,* and you could join up with—I don't know, *anybody*, you could join up with the League of Assassins or something and bring about the goddamn end of the world and Bruce would still welcome you home with *open arms,* but you're

just content to be *selfish* and run around throwing it all away. Being blown up doesn't give you an excuse for being SUCH A DICK!"

Jason snarled, "You're *superfluous* is what you are, nobody gives a shit about you, you annoying, pointless, *shithole replacement—"*

"Shhh," said Tim suddenly, whipping around.

This actually startled Jason out of his tirade. "*What?"*

"Be quiet," said Tim, low and urgent.

Jason listened, then scowled. "That's that fucking singing again, you moron. It's Marion." But the distraction had punctured a hole in his anger like a balloon.

Tim didn't answer, or look at him.

And now that Jason was listening (though he would never have admitted that to Tim) he could hear that it *was* different. Strange. Disjointed, echoing. A record that skipped every so often.

Then the singing focused in on one place, off to their left.

"Um," said Tim, cautiously. "Hi, Marion."

She had her back to them, looking off to the distance. Her stance was crooked, swaying, and it made the hair on Jason's neck stand up.

Marion turned around, and Tim and Jason both took an instinctive step backwards.

Her head was tipped unnaturally to the left, and her eyes were huge. Filmy. Hungry.

Tim said, "Marion?"

Her jaw fell open, and kept opening. Her face stretched, eyes ballooning, until they were looking at her skull, or a semblance of a skull, or maybe they could jut see her skull through her skin. Her grin was ghastly, huge, with far too many teeth.

Jason said, "*Holy* fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck."

She said, voice croaked and jagged, "I've changed my mind, I'm afraid. I want you to stay in here with me."

“This is what you get for being too polite to strangers,” Jason said, and then she lunged at them, fingers crabbed and hooked— and actually lifted clean off the ground, a demented, hovering wraith.

“I don’t think ghosts should be able to fly,” said Tim, darting away from her grasping hands. “I think that’s unfair.”

Marion froze, then rose up in height with an unearthly shriek of rage. “*I am no ghost,* ” she snarled, three feet too tall. Her mouth stretched across her face like a jack-o'lantern’s.

Jason prowled around her, considering. “How do we kill a ghost?”

She turned on him, and she was all skull, her blond hair floating around her head.

Her clawed hands connected with his shoulders, and he actually lifted off the ground with the force of her shove. His back slammed into a rock, crushing the air from his lungs—he rolled a little on impact to minimize the damage—and rolled straight off a ledge.

There was a single heartstopping second where he was airborne, and then he landed, hard, on his feet. The ugly, undistributed impact rolled through his body, smashing his teeth together.

For a second, he only stood there, dragging breaths in unevenly.

Then Tim jumped down next to him, expression coiled and startled.

Jason looked at him and said, “What the fuck?”

“I don’t know if you can kill a ghost,” Tim told him.

A sound like nails on a chalkboard screeched from overhead. Both of them looked up.

Marion loomed over the ledge above them, head still brokenly too far left, leering down at them.

Jason pulled out his gun and shot her experimentally.

Her face warped a little for a moment, returning to its proper human countenance, and then the grinning skull was back, eyes bulging. The bullet hadn’t done a thing.

She began to crawl down the rockface, hands dragging the rest of her body along. Gravity seemed to want nothing to do with her, so she

made her way down the cliff face like some sort of huge, jittery insect.

“Nope,” decided Jason.

Both he and Tim ran.

It was difficult to run over such an irregular terrain, but they did their best, scrambling over protruding rocks slippery with moss, darting around pools of water. Mist made the air cold. The waterfalls hissed.

Tim said, panting just a little, “Hey, wait. Stop.”

Jason didn’t stop as fast as Tim did, turning as he slowed a little. “*Wait?* What are we—”

He stopped. Looked around.

“—running from,” Tim said. “She’s gone.”

“For the fucking love of—” Jason pinched his nose between his fingers. “God. Well. I guess that’s. Fine. What.”

Tim held up a hand.

“Stop doing that,” Jason said.

Tim glared at him and made another gesture at him, this one significantly ruder.

“Oh, really mature,” said Jason.

“That,” snapped Tim. “What’s *that?”*

Jason looked around.

About sixty feet from them, a jagged rift in the ground cut its way across their path, slicing across the landscape. It was probably about twenty feet across at its widest, but as Jason looked along it, he saw that there were narrow parts that were only about six feet wide. They could jump it, but they’d have to hike further to the left.

Jason peered towards the wall. The opening in the cave was still about three miles off.

“Hear that?” Tim said suddenly.

Jason let out a quick, cross breath. “I wish you’d stop staying that.”

“I’m just the messenger, here.”

Jason listened.

A low, rushing sound: the sound of water flowing. Jason would have written it off as one of the waterfalls, but it was building in volume—like a wave.

A big wave.

“What was that Marion said,” said Tim, voice expressionless, “about her making the water swallow us?”

Jason looked up. The walls of rough, slippery boulders made it difficult to see anything. They wouldn’t see water until it surged over the tops of the rocks, and by then it would be too late.

He said, “I hate it here. What’s our plan?”

The sound of the water grew louder: a low, oncoming roar.

“A lot of the water will probably go down into the fissure,” Tim said, making his way towards it. His voice was still very flat, expression controlled. Jason cooled his adrenaline-jumping heart, reminded it to keep its head until something actually happened. “But we’re probably going to have to swim for it. But I don’t like the idea of being caught inside that fissure, either.”

They began to stride. Not running, not yet, but by no means still.

“We can jump over the fissure,” Jason said, pointing—he had to raise his voice over the ever-increasing volume of the water bearing down on them— “but it’ll take us closer to where the sound of the water is coming from.”

“Well, then,” said Tim tightly, “Let’s go.”

A booming crash echoed, and Jason looked up. A wave, white with movement, roared over the rocks.

There was a moment where it all seemed suspended: the wall of water, the knowledge that they would be crushed against the rocks below them, the back of Tim’s head, his clenched fists.

The water smashed down against the rocks, rushing down at them.

Jason knew that running now would be a terrible idea, so he braced his whole body, and…

It streamed down around him, harmless, all anticipated pressure ten times less than what it should have been. It only came up as high as his knees, shockingly weak for the amount of sound it had produced. He had to lock himself in place, sure, lean against the current, but it was nothing compared to what he had been anticipating.

He was sick to death of how up and down this place was.

Tim looked around at him, jaw set, eyes grim; he'd noticed the same thing Jason had. He was leaning against the current, too, but only just.

"So," Tim said. "Think she just decided not to kill us, or what?"

"Shut up a second," Jason said, scanning their surroundings. "I don't wanna—"

The water streaming around his legs leapt up around him, plunging him into a bubble of water.

For a second, he was too stunned to do anything. Shock wrestled him into a chokehold, and by the time he wrestled his way back out of it, he was still underwater.

He tried swimming to the surface, but there was no surface. He was in a bubble of *water.* If he reached high enough, his fingers escaped the water, brushing the air that his lungs needed—but no matter how he swam, jerked, or writhed, the water stayed cinched around him.

As his desperation grew, it was shot through with anger: what a stupid, stupid way to die. Drowned, with oxygen barely five feet away from him.

He kept moving, trying frantically to swim up, to the side—it was pointless, yes, but it turned out that just waiting to drown wasn't a thing you could convince your brain to do. Blood roared in his ears, and his heart slammed away inside of him, frantic as a trapped bird.

It took him a long time before his lungs were crying out for air. He'd been trained to hold his breath for a long time, and he was bitterly wishing that wasn't true, he wanted to get it *over with,* he wanted it done . . . dizziness began to set in, and he twisted, trying for one last go—

And the water dropped him on the grass, splashing down around him harmlessly. It streamed past him, down the incline, and left him lying there.

Pain lanced through his lungs as he took gulping breaths, choking out accidentally inhaled water in the same go. He rolled over on his back, staring up at the cavern ceiling, then twisted around, still gasping.

Tim was on his knees and hands, bent over and inhaling as frantically as Jason was. He glanced over at Jason, wet hair plastered like black ink over his skull, expression open and incredulous.

They were alive. Why were they alive?

Tim looked at something over Jason's head, and Jason looked around, pushing himself to his knees, too.

Marion was on the other side of the jagged canyon, kneeling next to it. She stared down at something inside of the darkness, palms pressed flat to the grass. Her face was human again, and she was crying.

Not crying—wailing, tears on her cheeks, dripping into her open mouth. He could see every one of her bottom teeth.

Jason grunted as he turned away, climbed to his feet. Grabbed his pack. He walked over and kicked Tim a little, who jarred at it and looked up.

"Come on," Jason said. Marion's cries grew louder.

Tim looked up at him, expression inscrutable, then shouldered his pack.

They walked to the narrowest part of the fissure, which measured maybe five feet across. Jason looked down it. It was a long, dark way down.

They threw their packs across and then leapt themselves with little issue. Jason was deciding which route would take them to the opening in the cave the fastest when he realized Tim wasn't next to him.

"Tim— *Tim.* For the—"

But Jason had started to figure out that when Tim had set his mind to something, nothing and nobody was going to stop him. He was the type of person that needed to *see* the car crash instead of just hearing

about it. So he followed Tim down the fissure, to where it was wide and jagged and horrifically deep.

Tim stopped and stared down, and Jason peered over his shoulder.

Directly below Marion, far down, was a crumpled heap. It had on a yellow blouse and brown pants.

Marion's cries became words—one, Jason corrected himself. Just one word, repeated over and over again.

No, no, no. No, no, no, no! No, no. No.

The cavern seemed to watch them, rocks slick with water, purple flowers blooming innocently. It could almost have been an ordinary accident. A woman lost in a canyon, never seen again.

But this place wasn't ordinary. They were watching a ghost scream over its own shell.

Jason tugged Tim's shoulder. Without looking at him, Tim turned away, and Jason followed him.

They hiked away, taking care as they climbed. Both of them were thinking about that body.

Marion's cries had faded to nearly nothing by the time Tim asked suddenly, "Do you think we should have gotten . . . her name? Her full name? We could have, I don't know. Told somebody, when we get out. I didn't think of it."

He sounded troubled by this, by the fact that he had forgotten.

Jason looked back at him; somehow, he had ended up in front. "And what? Reminded her that she wanted to drown us?"

But there was no venom in his voice. He meant to comfort, he just didn't know how.

Tim looked up at him. His mouth was pressed into an unhappy shape, eyebrows furrowed. Tim never really looked *young,* even though he was—something about how viciously practical his eyes were all the time, how serious his features were—but just then, he looked his age.

Tim said, "Dick would have thought of it."

It was true. Jason sighed uncomfortably. "Listen. Sometimes you've

just gotta pick yourself. Dick would've died back there if he'd done that, and you know it. I know this goes against every—Bat code in the world, or whatever, but there's nothing wrong with knowing when to help and when to survive." He glanced around. Water dripped off the dark boulders in a ripple of uneven sound. It was the only noise; Marion's voice had gone mercifully silent. "Especially around here."

Tim nodded, glancing first at him and then away. Jason waited, but Tim didn't say anything else, so he turned and kept going.

Half an hour later, they reached the opening. It was huge—it had to have been, for Jason to see it so far off—but it stalled Jason a bit. A cold draft drifted out from the tunnel: a dank, earthy smell. The smell of underground.

"Delightful," muttered Tim from behind him.

"That's the spirit," muttered Jason back.

They plunged their way back into the tunnels.

Gray-stoned walls pressed in on them, worse this time around; Jason had to work his heart rate down, convince it that they were doing this, no matter what bad memories resurfaced. They had to go on, and go on they did. Hunger gnawed at him, sharp and insistent, but he ignored it as best he could.

It was silent for around an hour, long enough that Jason, surprising himself, rewound and examined their fight. He wondered, fleetingly, whether he should apologize—and that jolted him a bit. As a rule, Jason really didn't go in for apologizing.

He didn't know how to say in a caustic, cool way that he kept trying to leave the past in the past, but it liked to claw its way through his lungs and then he'd remember—oh, yeah. He was still angry about it. All of it. All the time.

The tunnels grew dim, then nearly too dark to see. Jason became very aware of all of his limbs, of the stillness, of the quiet. There was no sound, not even the usual chittering of shadowed insects or voices of unseen origins.

"Well," he said, when he couldn't stand the silence anymore, "I just don't think—"

He turned. His voice died in his throat.

Tim wasn't there. It was a close, dim darkness now, but he could tell, somehow, that he was alone. Very alone.

He snapped anyway, "Drake? *Drake."*

Nobody answered.

Cursing, he turned, took a step, and fell.

It wasn't a *long* fall, but it still got him good. He spit a few more winded swear words, then slowly sat up. He grabbed at his side where he'd landed on it and probed at his ribs. The last thing he needed was a broken bone and nothing to splint it. Nothing broken, but fractured, maybe. Bruised, definitely.

He sat there for a minute, breathing.

"Tim?" he tried again, after a few minutes, in case Tim was still somewhere in silence, too.

Nothing.

Shit.

The situation warranted it, so he said it out loud. "Shit."

Heaving himself to his feet, he settled his backpack heavily on his shoulders and walked, because there was simply nothing else to do. It was very, very dark now, impossible to see anything at all, and he tested each step before he took it. This went on for several terribly silent minutes until he ran into something solid.

A wall. That figured. He ran his hands over it, carefully, until his hands hit a doorknob. Twisting it, he threw it open.

Light blared in his eyes, and he blinked, squinting. A cacophony of sounds flooded in: horns honking, engines running, people chattering, the hiss of rain. Overlaying it all, though, was a song, grainy and sickly cheerful, a woman singing from a record player turned up too loud: *And the people in the houses went to the university, where they were put in boxes and they come out all the same…*

Jason's eyes adjusted.

He was looking out onto a diner with garishly red and yellow tables,

completely empty of people. Blurry neon lights buzzed outside. Rain dripped down the windows, and cars zipped past, headlights yellow and distorted, but there were no people. He squinted, focusing. Nope. No one. Not even in the driver's seats.

"*. . . little boxes on a hillside, little boxes all the same . . .*"

The sound of people talking was as clear as day. Jason stepped inside properly, and a blaring heater flooded over his cold skin. By the sound of it, the diner should have been crowded.

Every seat was empty. The air smelled of frying meat and french fries and toasting bread, and nobody was there.

"*. . . and they're all made of ticky-tacky, and they all look just the same,*" crooned the woman happily.

"This is so fucked," muttered Jason, looking around carefully, hand on his gun in his pocket. "This is so, so fucked, and whatever the hell you're doing, it won't work."

A man's voice, bored, rose over the inane chatter. "Order for Jason."

Jason whirled.

On the counter, a red tray heaped with steaming food had appeared, as though some unseen hand had shoved it out upon completion. There was still nobody in sight.

Jason looked around, waiting for the punchline.

It didn't come. After another beat of silence, he strode to the food, sat down on a red barstool, and began to eat.

He made himself to slow down after inhaling a burger, half a salad, and a fat, warm roll. It wouldn't do him any good if he just threw this all up later.

He finished the salad, and then forced himself to wrap up the remainder of the food, stowing it in his pack. Judging by how long they had gone before food appeared again, they had a long while to go before they—

They.

God *dammit,* Drake.

"*. . .and they all look just the same . . .*"

A hand reached out and stole a stray french fry off his tray.

"I thought you were gone," Jason said, somewhat stupidly.

The younger version of himself munched thoughtfully on the french fry, his young shoulders hunched, thin elbows perched on the countertop. "Never am." He gave a sweet, conspiratorial grin. "Used to say I haunted the batcave, you know. That 'beloved son gone too soon.'" He shrugged. "Or maybe Dad just liked talking to the air."

Jason blew out a breath through his nose, sharp and quick. "Except," he muttered, looking around the diner again, "he wasn't gone."

"*And they all look just the same and they all look just the same and they all look just the same and they all look—*"

Jason glanced at young Jason. Something uneasy moved down his spine. "Sounds like the record's stuck."

The younger him shrugged expansively, and the move was all Jason—both of them. "A lot of things are stuck here." He eyed Jason again, keen, young. "Dad begged you to come home," he said, thoughtful and sudden. Sadness had crept into the set of his thin hands, and Jesus, Jason really had once been that small, hadn't he. "Why didn't you?"

Fresh off his vicious, grappling fight with Tim, Jason didn't have a lot left in him to go another round with a face he'd once seen in the mirror. "Dad—Bruce," he corrected, flexing his jaw, "doesn't give a shit."

"You know that's not true," said the younger Jason quietly. "You know it's not."

"And what the fuck do you know?" There may only have been cinders, but Jason's anger flared to life enough for him to snap.

A sound began to creep up through the talking, the horns, the hiss of frying onions: a small, rhythmic *tick, tick, tick.*

The younger Jason stared at him and said, "What did you let me turn into?"

Jason's response was strangled on his tongue; he had looked over and found the younger Jason's face pulsing blood, his eyes glassy and

dead, Robin uniform charred and torn to shreds.

Jason staggered to his feet and fled the diner.

Tick, tick, tick followed him out as he slammed the door, chest heaving.

He *remembered*— no you don't, no you don't, stop it, stop—he *remembered being there* —

Behind his eyes was a bomb. He stumbled out the door, and he was back in the tunnels.

His eyes adjusted.

No. Not the tunnels. A corridor, made of glossy black marble, square and precise. Equally precise square hollows in the walls held intricate torches that burned strange and bright. There was no sound.

Oh, he knew exactly where he was.

Fuck.

Well, if he was going out fighting a weird illusion version of the League of Assassins, then so be it. That was just how the chips had fallen. Whatever.

He plunged his hand into his pocket for his gun and found nothing.

He stood there for a second, just breathing. Then he checked his pack, his other pocket, his boot. Nothing.

Though he'd never tell anybody, there were some days that Jason wished he'd wake up and forget how to use a gun. Honest to God. But he hated hand to hand combat more.

The League liked killing that way. Liked the vicious, twisted intimacy of bearing down and holding until the life had been squeezed out. Jason couldn't fucking stand it. Guns were brutal, but at least they were fast.

Jason walked, forcing his body to loosen, prepare for a fight. His hands flexed, flexed again.

He paced down corridor after corridor, but there was no one there. The place was as empty as a tomb.

They made him walk those empty, unpleasantly well-known corridors for a long time. It was enough to make his blood boil. It was enough to twist his stomach, his heart. The last time he'd walked these halls he'd been half a person. He'd gone too far for this to drag him back.

At least, that was what he told himself.

Jason came out, finally, in what should have been the main hall—it *was* the main hall, in fact, but with one key difference: it was walls and walls of heads.

They weren't bloody, severed heads. They were neat, almost peaceful in their individual hollows. Despite the obviously dead part, they almost could have been attached to their bodies.

Don't look at them. Don't focus on them.

He glanced over.

The head to his left was Starfire's.

He snapped his head back to center.

Against his will, his eyes flitted from head to head . . . it was like trying to look away from a car crash. He forced himself to look away after a few seconds, to stare at the ground, focus on the marble, but there was a ringing in his ears: the heads were everybody he'd ever known, plucked from every moment of his life.

"Well. Are you just going to stand there?"

Jason's eyes jumped up.

There was still nobody in the room. Candles flickered eerily. But he knew that voice.

"Talia," he said, brusque and cold. He could feel himself turning back the clock: turning back into somebody he'd been trying to leave behind him for years.

Then he shook himself. It wasn't Talia. It wasn't the League. All of this was for show.

So he made a point of relaxing, sliding out of his soldier's ramrod straight stance, and drawled, "Been a while. Love what you've done with the place. Hiding?"

“Hardly,” said Talia al Ghul.

“Really. Well. As much as I’d like to catch up, I don’t have the time. You wouldn’t happen to know the way out, would you,” Jason said, strolling between pillars. Candles flickered low in their sconces. Puddles of wax grew on the floor underneath.

“You have to earn it, of course,” she answered coldly.

Jason scowled. “Then come out and face me.”

“Ah, ah, ah,” she said.

He’d found her voice. Or rather, her head. Her eyes were closed, face relaxed, except for the moving mouth.

“Not until,” she said, “you earn it.”

He could feel in his bones that this was going to be an ugly fight. He was already tired of it. He missed the weight of his gun in his hand.

A shift, a whisper. Jason was ready.

It was just training. He’d done this all before, he reasoned within himself, as the man with scars across his neck went for Jason’s throat. He had been in the League, and they had beaten him, broken him, remade him into a machine. He had done this before. He could do it again. *I did this before*, he thought, a strange silence in his head as he held on until the man wasn’t moving anymore. *I’m going to do it again* . They were going to make him do it again.

The fights didn’t last long. They couldn’t, not when it was just kill or be killed and there were no weapons. Just bodies, rammed into each other like animals. Jason was strong and fast, though not as strong, he noticed distantly, as when he first came out of the Pit. And that was one good thing. Of everything, at least he could tell that the Pit was getting further and further behind him. They couldn’t make him relive that.

There were a lot. There had been a lot before, and there were a lot now. They went at him one at a time, wearing him down. He left bodies strewn behind him. If his ribs weren’t fractured then, they definitely were now. At one point his eyes were nearly gouged out.

The world narrowed. There wasn’t anything but the anticipation of the next hit, the roar of his blood, the beat of his heart. The feeling of

knowing that they had finally gotten too close and the only thing left was to close his hands and lock his muscles up and wait until what he held wasn't moving anymore. There wasn't anything in his head, except maybe a buried, deep impression that he didn't want to do this. That he was tired of this. Overlaid was the knowledge that it didn't matter. He had to do this.

His only solace was that Tim wasn't here to watch.

Not that it mattered. Tim knew firsthand the monster that lived inside of him.

When he was done again after he didn't know how many times, he looked up. Sweat was dripping into his eyes. His legs shook with exhaustion, and his hands were slicked with blood.

Fifteen-year-old Jason was watching him, shoulders narrow. Eyes too big for his face. A kid. Just a kid. *What did you let me turn into?*

Jason felt something burning rush through him. He had done it to survive here *and* then, and that was God's ugly truth. The nasty thing living inside of him had come out when war had swallowed him whole, and it lived there still, a Jekyll and Hyde fiasco. And he'd never pretended otherwise, and he wasn't going to pretend for that kid.

He stood again, turning away. He waited.

There was only death, and red. Red was the only color in this godawful place, he remembered that now.

"Adequate," remarked Talia al Ghul's voice, exactly the way she had back then.

The colorless jaw unhinged. A large, silver key rested on her blue tongue.

Jason walked around the carnage that he had inflicted and took it. When the backpack rested on his shoulders he winced, hissing. His body felt battered, bruised, and now he had to walk again.

He didn't look back.

* * *

Tim dropped, hard, onto cold earth.

Coughing a little, wincing, brushing a dead plant out of his face, he pulled himself up, turning around and around.

He was outside again. *Well,* he amended, inwardly, *outside as outside in the Labyrinth you can get.*

The world was gray. Tendrils of fog drifted through spiked, jabbing trees bare of leaves, and dead gray plants curled listlessly over the ground. The dirt was packed and slate-colored, and an undeniable chill began to burrow at his exposed skin.

There was clearly no one in sight, but he tried anyway. "Todd? Jason."

Nobody answered.

"Jason! It's not funny. I don't care if you're pissed, if you're there, tell me."

Still nothing.

Tim allowed himself to close his eyes and simmer with rage at this stupid, stupid situation, at stupid, *stupid* Jason Todd, and the fact that it was stupid, stupid Christmas.

Then he took a jacket out of his backpack, put it on, and started walking.

The landscape didn't change for a while: just those bare trees, reaching clawed fingers to the gray sky. His boots crunched over dead plants and thin, delicate curls of hoarfrost. He pulled his sleeves over his hands.

Tim strained for any sounds at all, eyes darting everywhere, phantom shadows making him jumpy. There was nothing. The silence did not let up.

Eventually, he saw the trees up ahead end abruptly, and something shimmered dully: another lake.

"I am not jumping in another lake," he muttered aloud to whatever was listening. "You can't make me do that. I am not fighting another sea monster."

A voice from behind him said, sounding amused, "Nobody's making you fight another sea monster, my dude."

Tim didn't turn around.

It didn't matter, though, because an instant later, with the quick rushing sound that accompanied him everywhere, Bart Allen was grinning toothily at him, dressed casually in jeans and a white t-shirt and a blue jacket.

"Don't," Tim said, and had to get himself together. "Don't. Take off his face. I mean it."

"Aw, come on, Timmy," whined Bart, and it was all Bart, that voice. It was the voice that Bart put on when Tim wouldn't give him his last cookie. "I don't know how I ended up here and I'm glad to see you! What's wrong?"

"No, you don't. You're not Bart. *Stop* it." He couldn't do this now, not when he was furious with Jason and furious with his family and furious with the world. If he had to stare at Bart's open, well-loved face for another minute, he was going to do something dumb, like thinking for one split second that somebody in here didn't hate him and want him dead.

Tim was no stranger to isolation, self-inflicted or otherwise, but this total lack of the ability to contact anybody at all mixed in with a dash of this not-Bart might be enough to make him crack.

"Nobody's making you jump in the lake," Bart said patiently, as though Tim were just being moody and melodramatic. "There's a cabin about a mile that way. Come on."

Tim did not move, even after Bart had whizzed away and then back again, frowning at Tim.

"I," Tim told him coolly, "am not going anywhere with you."

Bart did the thing where he rolled his eyes and his head at the same time— *it's not him it's not him it's not him it's notitisnot*— and said, "Jee-*eez* Tim. Why are you being like this?"

"I," said Tim, struggling not to lose his cool, "am trapped in a maze of death with whatever *you* are, and I've lost Jason, and I need you to leave me alone."

Bart's face fell, and Tim's heart twanged automatically. "Whatever *I* am? Tim—"

Oh, this was so much worse. Pavlos had at least broken character enough that even though seeing all those dead and dying faces had stabbed into Tim's chest, he had been able to remember that it was not real.

"Look, Bart—" he sighed, and then shook himself. "I am not engaging. Leave me alone."

"Well, at least let's just go to the cabin," said Bart, still looking a little hurt. "You look cold. And I can hear your tummy growling from here."

This made Tim pause. "Is there . . . food at this cabin?"

Not-Bart looked pleased at having piqued Tim's interest. "Sure is, my dude."

Tim weighed his options, but he already knew he'd lost. He hadn't really eaten for days, and he couldn't keep going for much longer before his blood sugar got too low for him to move effectively. He was already lightheaded from hunger, and he needed all of his wits about him if he was going to survive in here.

"Fine," muttered Tim. "Fine. But you stay away from me."

The not-Bart took this as the real Bart would have: followed it in technicality, but not in practicality. He stayed six feet away from Tim, but he didn't leave, chattering the whole way to the cabin by the lake, which came into view a few minutes later. It was an exposed, simple looking structure, the bare bones of a shelter.

It was sitting on the shore of the lake, and now that he was closer, Tim saw that the entire thing was frozen over, which did nothing for his trepidation. It was the white, sturdy kind of ice, the kind that told of a winter that had lasted for months and months and months.

Sometimes Bart would zip away, but he never stayed long, and they were nearly to the cabin when Bart flashed back into Tim's line of view and announced, "There's a thing in the trees over there."

The amount of hand-flapping that accompanied this statement conveyed that he felt rather urgent about this fact.

"Define 'thing,' Bart," said Tim, with automatic fond exasperation, before he caught himself again. *Goddammit.*

The problem was that he sort of wanted Bart to be there. He needed a distraction from whatever fear was beginning to nest uncomfortably inside of him, and he sort of wanted the distraction to like him.

“Big. Feathered. For sure a monster thingy. Sharp.”

“Sharp what?” Tim searched the spined, unnatural trees. Nothing moved, but the slowly creeping fog limited his visibility pretty significantly.

“Beak,” said Bart, miming a falcon-like curved beak on himself. “Thing. But it had lots of eyes.”

“How big?” Tim did not like the *lots of eyes* bit at all.

Bart shrugged and held a hand up to demonstrate. “Maybe six feet with its head.”

Big.

“Damn,” muttered Tim, thinking.

Bart observed, “You still need to eat.”

Unfortunately true. “Fine.”

They reached the cabin. Tim, after looking calculatingly at Bart, opened the door carefully.

Inside was as bare as the outside, little more than closely fitted wood planks, except for the middle, where a big square trapdoor dominated the floor with a tarnished silver lock on one side. Tim wasn’t too terribly concerned with that, though, because next to it was a table burdened with food: fluffy salads, sweating pitchers of lemonade, steaming potatoes, three different types of bread, cheeses layered on top of each other next to piles of olives and grapes

He hesitated, glancing shrewdly at Bart even as his mouth watered. “What’s the catch?”

Bart looked at him serenely, and in that gaze, Tim found his first shred of proof that this Bart Allen was not his. The buzz of Bart’s mind, constantly churning, was not behind those eyes. It was empty, cold.

“You do,” said Bart, voice changing slightly, “need to eat.”

Tim stared at him a long time, trying and failing to predict the next

move. There was a thing in the forest that would likely attack him. This not-Bart would inevitably turn on him.

And who knew where Jason was.

God, this was so much worse alone. At least Tim had known Jason was real. Bastard.

Still side-eyeing not-Bart, Tim walked over to the table, grabbed a piece of bread, and stuffed it into his mouth.

He did not forget to keep checking the woods around the cabin, or to keep an eye on Bart as he ate. Three hastily made sandwiches vanished before nausea began to creep in. He wrapped up what would fit inside his pack, popped one more olive in his mouth, and sighed, holding out a pickle to Bart.

Not-Bart looked at him strangely.

Tim sighed again. “He loves pickles. You’re getting sloppy. Now, what’s with this?”

He nudged the lock of the trap door.

“Your test,” said not-Bart.

Tim gave him a derisive look. “Clearly,” he said, voice flat. “Is it going to help me find Jason?”

Not-Bart blinked at him quizzically. “Since when do you care about the red psycho?”

“I’ll give you ten points. Bart does call him that,” said Tim, moving away from the food to keep from snacking on it. Too full and it would slow him down. He already felt uncomfortably like taking a nap. “I still need to find him. I don’t suppose you could tell me if . . . if he’s dead.”

Bart’s eyebrows drew together. “Dude. What does it matter?”

Tim snapped, “It does matter.”

Not-Bart eyed him again, and Tim looked back. The curiosity that not-Bart looked back at him with wore Bart’s face, but it was a cold, eerie curiosity, the sort that one felt when one looked at a strange bug for too long.

Not-Bart said, “It’s not going to change the fact that we’re stuck in here.”

“*We* are not anything,” Tim said, “because *you* are not real, and Jason *is,* and if it’s all the same to everyone, I’d rather not be alone with *ghosts*.”

He searched the cabin one more time, just to be sure, and then left it, making sure he didn’t shut the door—just in case.

It was still quiet, still bitterly cold. The frozen lake stretched out before him, a silent, white expanse that offered no insight.

“Now,” said Tim, pulling a wickedly long knife out of his pack, scanning the gray trees, the shifting mist, “unless you’re going to tell me what I’m up against, you can go away now. I’m not going to starve to death anymore.”

“No can do, mister!” chirped Bart. Whatever thing that he’d had on his face before that had differentiated him from the real Bart was no longer there, cleverly hidden by whatever fuckery the Labyrinth was working. “We stick together, you know that.” He whizzed over to Tim, grin softening, hair windswept and fluffy. “We’ll get out of this, Tim, don’t worry.”

Tim stared at Bart. The pain welled, sudden and shocking. “*Stop it,”* he hissed, trying to force logic to come back and take over. “Whatever the hell you are. Pavlos? Whoever. Go away and *leave me alone.”*

Bart stared at him, face bewildered and hurt. “Tim . . . I don’t . . . what’s going on?”

Christ. Christ. God. Being curt with Bart was difficult even when he really deserved it, but this felt cruel, and wrong, and it looked like Bart. It looked like *Bart.*

Tim put his back to Bart. *Not* Bart.

“Go *away,”* he said to the lake, voice as vicious and sure as he could make it.

Silence.

When he turned back around, there was no one there.

Tim heaved a breath. This was a good thing. It was not a bad and

lonely thing, which was what his first thought was.

He turned back to the stark trees.

Nothing happened, for a time. Tim did not allow this to distract him. He stayed where he was, patient, silent, breath even and soft.

The smell was the first thing: moldy, sweet. A barn that hadn't been aired out in far too long.

Tim leaned forward on the balls of his feet, ready to spring in any direction. The knife was sure and steady in his grasp. He couldn't stand this part: the not knowing.

It was a shadow first, moving through the mist—and then it was a shape, and then it was hurtling at him.

The creature was not any larger than Bart had said, but it seemed unending, because it was so spindly and long: every limb stretched out endlessly, thin and tipped with wicked claws. It was feathered, greasy, gray as the landscape. Tim's main concern was the beak, long and grayish white and hooked, but the claws were going to be a problem, too.

And there *were* lots of eyes. They were placed evenly in paired rows, like a spider's. Pitch black and glossy.

Tim moved. It swung around, using its wing-arms to flip, and shrieked its displeasure. It lunged at him again.

Tim darted in and slashed at it with his knife; the feathers parted beneath his blade—it jabbed its beak at Tim's neck—Tim was already gone.

They grappled. The creature could not gain any ground, too cumbersome to keep up with Tim's nimble speed, but after the first slash, Tim couldn't touch it, either. It was impossible to say what it was; 'dinosaur' was the first thing that came to mind, but even that wasn't quite right. A demon-bird-thing.

Tim thought about a regular civilian facing off with this monstrosity. He thought about Bruce saying that even the worst of people deserved a fair trial, because no one person should be allowed to play God.

He added 'unethical' to his mental list of 'Why This Place Sucks' and leapt in again, slashing at the creature's throat.

It twisted downward, and Tim wasn't fast enough that time. It rammed the blunt heaviness of its head into Tim, and the force sent him flying backwards, skittering across the ice. He did not let go of his knife and he did not impale himself with it, but it was a close call on both counts.

He pulled himself back to his feet, then recalibrated and tried again. The ice was *slippery,* which he really should have seen coming but simply hadn't .

The thing followed him out onto the lake, stabbing its long, wicked claws into the ice as it went, keeping itself steady.

The cracks spread out from the claws. Tim watched them, mouth turning down in displeasure. This had just gotten a whole lot harder.

"I," he told it, "am not going back in a lake."

It leapt at him with a massive flap, screeching.

This time around it was much, much worse, and Tim knew instantly that he had lost the advantage of speed—which was the only advantage he had against this thing, as it turned out. The ice made him too slow, and if he tried to go faster, he would end up scrambling for balance against the surface.

He slashed at the thing again, and his knife bit into it; in return, the creature pinned him to the ice.

Tim pushed against it, grunting as the weight of it pressed down on his chest, but it was *heavy,* ridiculously so, and it reared up slightly—the huge beak parted, dove for Tim's throat—

And then the weight was gone. There was a frantic gust of wind, and Tim was in the middle of the lake instead of near the edge.

The creature screamed and dove for the nuisance that had distracted it, but the nuisance was already gone, whizzing back to Tim's side.

His fluffy hair flapped as he yanked himself to a stop. "Oooh, I don't like it," said Bart, bouncing on the balls of his feet. His eyes were wild, fixed on the creature. "I don't like it. Too many eyes, too many claws. Who comes up with this stuff? Oh, it's gonna try again—did your knife even do anything to it?"

Tim's brain hurt. He was trying to account for all the possible endings

of this scenario, and it turned out that there were too many. He wished his overwhelming reaction hadn't been absolute relief at seeing Bart— *not Bart*— again. "I don't know, I don't see any blood. You didn't see a key, did you?"

"A *key?"*

"Like around its neck, or something." When Bart stared at him like he had grown another head, Tim snapped defensively, "It's happened before! Just check, Bart."

The space where Bart was temporarily became Bart-less, and then he was back. "There's nothing but a load of feathers and claws, Timmy. Our game plan should probably include this, though."

He held out a short, blunt knife, silver and simple.

Tim eyed it distrustfully. "Where'd you get *that?"*

They had to pause briefly while Bart snatched Tim and ran with him fifteen yards to their right so they wouldn't have their heads snapped off by a beak. The creature scrambled across the ice where they had been standing a moment ago, shrieking furiously.

"Damn, that hurts my ears," muttered Bart. "Knife. Found it in the woods after you were being mean to me."

He glared at Tim reproachfully.

Tim pretended not to notice. This Bart had saved his life, so they would have to be good for now. And sue him, he wanted his friend. Even if it was this weird copy.

"It's probably part of the test. What's that weird stuff on it?"

Because the silver edge of the knife was slicked with a faint gummy *something,* something nearly transparent, tinted dark red, nearly black.

Bart shrugged and hummed *I dunno,* then sped away.

The monster screamed again, its claws puncturing the ice.

"Oh, boy," muttered Tim, staring at the ice. It was covered in cracks now—deep gouges that fractured the surface, and he could see through the ice where bubbles had begun to stream up towards the fissures.

Bart reappeared, hair waving. “That thing is big. And, like . . . hard. Physically. Like . . . invulnerable hard. Like this knife won’t go through it hard.” Then he added, perfunctory, “That’s what she said —”

A colossal flap. Wind buffeted them. The creature dove for Tim again, beak chattering.

When Tim rolled neatly out of the way, the ice cracked underneath him.

“Bart,” said Tim, “if the last thing I ever hear is a ‘that’s what she said’ joke, I’m gonna be pissed.”

The monster’s beak darted for him again, wing-arms wheeling. Tim slid on the ice, launching himself sideways, diving away.

There was a massive crack, a thunderclap in the silence.

Bart’s voice shrieked, *“Tim!”*

Tim rolled. There was a hole in the ice, black water lapping and splashing, and the creature was in the water, and the creature had its claws in Bart, and the creature was dragging him into the water.

Tim did not think. Tim acted. Tim saw his best friend hooked like a fish, and he lunged. He closed his hands around Bart’s wrist just before the monster dragged him under the water. Feathered limbs thrashed, throwing water everywhere, and the black eyes stared up balefully at Tim from beneath the surface.

“Tim,” said Bart, voice strained.

The water licked at Tim’s wrists. It was frigid. He braced his feet. “I’ve got you, Bart. I’ve got you.”

Bart stared up at him, eyes huge and upset, and then he reached for Tim with his other hand.

Tim expected to feel Bart’s other hand close around his for stability, but that wasn’t what happened. What happened was that there was a sick, shocking pain in Tim’s side, and Tim’s grip loosened, and then Bart was dragged beneath the water, and there was a knife sticking out of Tim.

Tim slid to his knees. He braced his hands on the ice, gasping. Pain

pulsed with every beat of his heart.

He sat there for a minute on the ice, sitting with his pain, with his futile self-fury, with the silence that felt like it was going to suffocate him.

I knew better. I knew better. I knew better, I knew *it, why why why—*

He kept thinking about Bart's face as he put the knife into Tim. How distraught. How instinctively Tim had trusted him. *Bart,* God—

But it hadn't been real, because this *damn Labyrinth—*

The water erupted upwards, and the creature screamed into the air, water pouring off its feathers. It hovered, malignant and large. An instant later, it was on top of Tim again, an impossibly heavy weight, and this time, the beak darted true.

But Tim Drake wasn't in the business of dying, even when he kind of wanted to. His limbs knew what to do, years of battle-hardened muscle training kicking in, and, as swift as ever, he took the knife out of himself and plunged it into the bottom of the creature's head, right where its beak ended and its weird feathers began.

The creature made one last strangled, ragged sound, body struggling. When it slumped, Tim cried out in agony as it fell on his stabbed side, vision whiting out a little.

It took him a while to wiggle free, half-shoving and half-sliding out from underneath it. It was not quick work, and Tim had to pause every few seconds and readjust where he had stuffed his hand against his side to stem the flow of blood. The wound wasn't going to kill him unless he let it.

Finally, he was free. He pushed himself wearily into a crouch and looked around.

He immediately wished he hadn't. Bart was floating facedown in the water, hair spreading in a strange halo around his head.

He can't die, Tim told himself, even as terror rose inside of him. *He can't* drown *, and besides, he wasn't here. He's a speedster, he's a* speedster, *one dumb monster couldn't* drown *him, it couldn't have—*

And there, as Tim stared in transfixed horror, was a chord around Bart's neck. It floated idly up around his head, and on the end of it

glimmered a silver key.

If Jason had been there, Tim could have asked him to do it. Would have begged him to do it. And Jason would have. He was a piece of shit sometimes, but Tim knew enough now to know that Jason would have just done it, wordlessly. And Tim wouldn't have been by himself, stabbed, staring at an exact replica of a best friend that was now dead.

But Tim was alone. And Jason could be just as dead as Bart was.

Don't think that don't think that

Tim half-crawled, half-staggered to the hole. He worked his courage up, twice. Twice it failed him.

Finally, he plunged his hand in and seized the key.

Bart's hand came up, quick as lightning, and seized Tim's wrist.

Bart pulled his head up, eyes white and blind, lips blue. He let Tim take the key. He let Tim desperately wrench himself free. He let Tim turn away, and he let Tim run.

Tim did not look back. He collapsed on the shore, face turned away, and made a terrible, awful sound from inside his chest. He made it once more. Then, after several long minutes, he pulled himself up, and staggered into the cabin.

* * *

Silia took off Bart's face. As the Labyrinth began to shift again, losing the crispness of its form the way it always did when the contestants were out of one particular section, she began to think. She faded back into the Labyrinth, still thinking.

She went ahead to go back and wait for Rhea.

Still, she was troubled.

Easy, she thought, and it incensed her. It was getting too easy. The Labyrinth was going *easy* on them. If she hadn't been there to torment Tim Drake, that test would have been childishly simple, a key frozen into the lake, meant to be retrieved by using the monster's claws.

The Labyrinth, for the first time in centuries, was changing. She had finally begun to notice it after the disappearance of two ghosts.

Jason Todd hadn't died. She would have to contend with him herself.

As for Tim Drake . . . the poison on the knife wasn't meant for humans. But that didn't mean that it wouldn't kill them.

"Sparrow," she said sharply into the nothingness. "Sparrow, I need you."

She didn't necessarily *like* dealing with Sparrow, but it was inevitable at this point. Everybody was failing her. The tests hadn't gone on for this long in ages.

And she disliked feeling uneasy. It was not a familiar feeling to her.

He came to her from the nothingness, shadowed and insubstantial. She may have been older than Sparrow, but Sparrow had drifted to places she had never gone. Held here by her own hatred for Markos and Rhea, Silia was as real as the Labyrinth, spite keeping her firmly in this realm, whatever realm it was. Sparrow was something different. Something more frightening. In another life, she might have called him a demon. Even so: Sparrow was her champion, her final play. He never lost.

Sparrow's figure formed loosely. "What is it now?"

It was a deep, grumbling voice, massive as the thunder she remembered from the mortal world long ago. She turned to him, her dress floating in slow waves. "I want it over. They're doing something to the Labyrinth. Can't you feel it?"

The shadow of Sparrow's head tipped to one side, as though he was considering. "The Labyrinth is not immune to change."

It wasn't. It was just that this time the change felt off, wrong, and it was unsettling her for the first time in hundreds of years. "This is something different. It doesn't matter. I want it finished. I'm tired of dealing with Rhea. It's Markos' turn."

"Impatient." Something flickered to life in Sparrow's shadows, a heartbeat or a flame or a clenched fist. "I have grown tired of your games."

"But you haven't grown tired of the sun."

Sparrow said nothing, but Silia didn't need him to. Silia was the only one who could manipulate the Labyrinth into doing what she wanted.

The others had to rely on becoming monsters themselves to torment the mortals, but Silia didn't need to. She didn't know why. Something about being the first challenger in this place had tied her to it in ways that even Markos and Rhea weren't. If the Labyrinth had its own heart, she was its hands, moving them however she wanted, twisting whatever she needed.

Thus, besides the Labyrinth itself, she was the only one who could command glimpses of the mortal world. In this place, it was the only leverage she would ever need. Every spirit in the Labyrinth would do anything to see sunlight, even if they could never touch it.

"Go to the cliffs," she said. "I want you to stop them. I want you to kill them."

There was a long minute. Silia waited.

"Fine," Sparrow rumbled at last. "I will go to the cliffs. But do not expect their deaths to reverse whatever is happening. In fact—" his voice faded, "you may only ensure it."

Chapter 7

After Tim climbed down the ladder from the trapdoor back into the damn tunnels, he made a quick, sloppy bandage for his side, tied it tight, and began walking. He'd stitch it later. His hands were useless. Every time he tried to steady them, he saw Bart in his mind's eye, floating, and they would shake. So he put it off for later, and made his way back into the depths of the Labyrinth.

He didn't think about the thin, sticky coating of whatever had been on that knife. There was nothing for it now. And maybe it had been nothing.

The tunnels were stone again. It was light enough to see fine by, but there was no light source anywhere to be found. While unsettling, it didn't make Tim think that he was about to be ambushed by something at any moment.

It was, surprisingly, not difficult to find Jason. Tim turned a corner and there he was, sitting against the wall, bandaging his knuckles. For a second Tim didn't know him; the shadows around him were dark and sinister, enhanced by the flat black shape of a gun by his knees. The muscles of his arms were big, chorded, threatening, emphasized by the sleeveless white undershirt he wore. He looked like he'd been doing rough work, and like he'd be rough with you.

Then he looked up, and his eyes were as tired as Tim felt.

"Hey," croaked Tim, leaning against the wall. "Fancy meeting you here."

"You'd better be real," Jason said to Tim after a long moment, a little desperate, a little angry. "Fucking. Christ. You'd better be real. *Jesus.* "

"I don't think he can hear you from here," croaked Tim, "but maybe if you said his name a few more times with a few more fucks, that would help."

Jason barked out a small, surprised laugh, and with it came the flash of a tired, real grin. It didn't matter that they'd fought, or that they had accidentally left each other; they had found each other again, two needles in a damning haystack, and they were glad to see each other. "Okay, fine. He's real. Goddammit. Goddamn you. Where did you go?"

“Walk in the park. You know.” He pushed off the wall, shuffled toward Jason, breathing very carefully. “You?”

Jason’s wry grin vanished. “Walk in the park,” he repeated, tonelessly.

“Damn. What a shiner,” Tim said, once he was close. Jason’s face was bruised, cut in several places.

Jason touched it gingerly, wincing. “League shit,” he said.

Tim said again, “Damn.” He put his back against the wall and slid down beside Jason. “You win?”

“Yeah,” Jason said, flatly. Then, “What happened?”

Tim just let out another slow breath through his mouth.

Jason shuffled, prodded him. “I said what happened. Hey. What’s wrong, where does it hurt?”

Tim opened his eyes. “How do you know I’m hurt?”

“Every Bat breathes like that when they’re hurt, it’s how Bruce taught us to breathe, you moron,” said Jason, without any heat. “Plus you’re sitting weird. Show it to me.”

Tim uncurled his legs with difficulty, loosened his death grip on his side. Jason peered at it, poking experimentally, carefully.

“Did you stitch this?” Jason shoved Tim’s hands away when they tried to go back to putting pressure on the wound. Jason peeled his shirt back to see it. “No, you didn’t,” he answered himself, when his fingers came away with the fresh blood pulsing through the bandage. “Hello? Are you trying to bleed out down here, dumbass? I swear to God. Come on. Come on,” he added, nearly gentle.

Jason pushed Tim down until he was lying flat next to the wall, grabbing for his backpack and rooting around in it. After a minute, he pulled out a small electric lantern and flipped it on, temporarily blinding Tim.

Tim complained thinly, “It’s *muddy.”*

“Yeah, yeah, shut up, you ungrateful little dork,” muttered Jason, pulling out his first aid kit. Then he reached for Tim’s crude bandage. “Okay, on three. One, two—”

Tim had time to think *he's going to pull on two, just like Dick does,* and then Jason pulled on two.

The bandage had plastered itself partially to Tim's skin with the dried blood. Jason ripped the whole thing off, and the noise Tim made was short, but agonized.

"I know, I know," Jason said, busying himself with cleaning the wound. His fingers were cold. "I know. Hold on. Hold *still.* This ain't too bad. Didn't even get anything important, whoever it was."

Gasping a little, Tim said, "Bart. But not really."

Jason jerked a little and glanced up at Tim, expression hard and furious. It steadied Tim's hands. He wasn't going to bleed out, and he wasn't by himself, and Jason, with that flinty, terrible gaze, was telling him he knew exactly how fucked up that was.

"Fucker," Jason said finally, shortly, and went back to the task at hand.

Jason applied a topical anesthetic, and as he did, he reached up and pressed, hard, on Tim's shoulder.

It cracked something inside of Tim, carved into him with surprisingly vicious longing, because that—that was all Bruce, that gesture, a feat performed hundreds of times on every one of his children when they were injured—that big, warm hand pressing down firmly, to distract from pain, to reassure of presence, to ground in reality.

Tim let out another careful breath through his mouth again and closed his eyes, not because he was in too much pain, but because he was afraid of showing it.

Jason pressed down on his shoulder once more, and then let go to stitch.

Tim felt, vaguely, as Jason began to sew it shut. It hurt a little, but it wasn't anything Tim wasn't used to.

Jason said, after several minutes, "Hey. Asshole. Say something."

Tim had gotten himself together a little at this point. He sang hoarsely, "It's a small world after all—"

"Not *that.*"

“You didn’t specify.”

“I said *say* something, not *sing* something.”

“Semantics.”

Jason made a derisive noise through his nose. “Whatever. I’m almost done, and you haven’t been this quiet since literally ever. I was worried you’d up and fucking died on me.”

“Nah,” said Tim.

Jason let out a quick, harsh breath. “Because being alone down here,” he said, after a second, a cross, terrible confession, “would actually be the worst thing.”

Tim said quietly, “Yeah.”

Jason finished stitching. Tim struggled, sat up. Together they bandaged it, and Tim changed into a new shirt. So did Jason.

“Okay,” muttered Tim, pulling his jacket back on and squaring his shoulders wearily. “I’m ready, let’s go.”

“You are fucking insane,” said Jason. “We are just walking until we’re out of the mud, and then we’re setting up camp. I don’t care what time it is, are you crazy? I am not carrying you if you pass out.”

Tim glared at him. He wasn’t running any marathons, but he wasn’t *dying.* He started walking away from Jason, forcing Jason to chase after him. “It was a light stabbing. He didn’t have a good position to actually dig it in far enough, and besides, I don’t even have an organ there anymore.”

Jason stared at him. “Excuse me, what do you mean you don’t even have—fuck. The spleen. You don’t have a spleen.”

Tim swiveled to look at him. “How do you know that? I didn’t tell you that.”

Jason rolled his eyes. “What’s that you’re always saying about family? We’re in the same family. I hear stuff, okay? Everybody always panicking because—oh.” He gave Tim a quick, startled look. “Antibiotics,” he said slowly, as though he was piecing it together as he said it. “You always need—because infection—because your immune system—”

Tim had never seen Jason look this thrown, or this serious. Maybe he *was* worried Tim was going to die on him. “Relax,” he said, and he was only lying a little when he said, “Since it’s been around two years since I lost it, mostly it’s fine. My immune system is bad, but you cleaned it, right? Because you’re not a total idiot.”

Jason’s face flipped through several expressions before he settled on annoyance. “Thanks for that, I am *not,* in fact. Of course I cleaned it.”

“Then it’s fine.” Probably.

Jason’s eyes narrowed into slits. “If anybody gives me shit about it when we get back, I’m gonna kill you.”

“You do that.”

The tunnels were back to being closely fitted stone, and it smelled like underground. Now that Tim was tuned to it, he could see Jason getting more restless, charged, eyes flitting up at the ceiling, around to the walls, to the ground, and then making the circuit again.

“No mud,” Jason announced, after a half an hour.

“I am not going to keel over,” Tim told him, irritated at Jason’s doubt that Tim could hold his own. “Besides, there’s an opening ahead.”

“Yeah. Probably with a monster in it.”

“Yeah, probably. Come on.”

There was an opening, and it was not quite a cavern, but it was no tunnel, either. It fell solidly into the ‘large room’ category.

Jason and Tim did not go in at first. They peered around carefully, but it was a bare room, with nothing even to hide behind. There were two separate openings, one straight ahead, and one to the right.

Tendrils of ivy crept over the stone walls, close and green and pointed.

Jason said, “Look at the ceiling.”

Tim expected spikes about to descend on their heads.

Instead, he found an intricate mosaic spreading over the whole ceiling. Blues swirled over and around each other, some so deep they were nearly black, some as bright as a summer sky. Interwoven among

the blues were tiny gold tiles in a shape that took Tim a second to piece together: an intricate, golden octopus, sparkling in the low light.

“Think we’ve got to fight an octopus next?” Jason wondered.

Tim repeated his new mantra. “I am not going in a lake again.”

“Well, me, neither.”

“So we’ll just stay away from bodies of water.”

“Yeah, that’ll for sure not backfire on us at all in here,” said Jason, but they went in anyway.

Their camp was smaller, with nothing to light a fire. Jason pulled the small electric lantern out again and pulled out his bedroll.

Tim laid down on his bedroll and contemplated the octopus.

Jason said, “Did you eat?”

“Yeah. You?”

“Yep. Guess it really doesn’t want us to starve to death.”

Tim blew out through his mouth.

Jason said, “You can sleep. I’ll take watch.”

“Just because I’m stabbed doesn’t mean I can’t take watch,” Tim said crossly.

“Stubborn motherfucker,” Jason muttered. Tim noted vaguely that his accent was stronger when he was tired. “I know that. I don’t want to sleep.”

“The . . . ‘League shit’, or whatever you called it,” Tim said. “What was it?”

Jason began to disassemble one of his guns, quickly and methodically. “You don’t wanna know,” he muttered finally. “Stuff I did before. Training. Killing,” he added, short and brusque.

Tim stared at the ceiling.

“You’ve got something to say about that, I guess,” said Jason, sharp and strange.

“No,” Tim said, honestly. “It’s like you said. Sometimes you’ve got to pick yourself. Shit happens,” he added, a little uncomfortably because he was worried about saying the wrong thing, “to us. It’s bad enough to just get through without tacking the unnecessary things on top.”

Jason didn’t say anything to that.

After a long time, Jason said suddenly, “Why do you think neither of us has seen Da— Bruce?”

Dad.

Tim had always known there was a different person underneath all of Jason’s sharp, sarcastic retorts and the disdainful, cool carelessness that he often retreated into, but in the past week he had begun to hear that different person, that someone he’d never met: the Jason from before. He had a feeling that one day, if— when—Jason had healed enough to properly come home, Jason would be a powerful, confident combination of those two people: the battle-hardened, vicious vigilante he’d been two years ago, and the bright, clever boy he had once been a lifetime ago.

He’s still your dad.

“I don’t know. I don’t want—maybe we won’t see him. Or a ghost version of him, or . . . whatever the hell happens down here.”

Jason said, “I don’t think I could . . . do that.”

It was an unsteady admission.

“Speaking of. I’ve been thinking,” said Tim.

“Yikes,” Jason said.

Tim flipped him off. “No, I just meant. After we get out of here, I can . . . if you wanted to come visit the Manor, or whatever. I can not be there.”

Jason was silent, contemplating this. “What do you mean?”

Tim folded his hands very precisely over his stomach. “I mean that if it’s harder for you to come back because I’m there, I would understand. I get it, all right? And I can . . . not be there. If you wanted to spend time with Damian, or Dick, or Dad.” He said ‘Dad’ very purposefully. *That’s your dad. It’s our dad.* “I can make

compromises."

When Jason still didn't say anything to this olive branch, Tim added, somewhat awkwardly, "That's all."

Tim knew he wasn't for everybody. He hadn't been, since he was a child. He'd worked it out; he wasn't stupid; that was why people left.

Tim was still carefully contemplating the ceiling, but he saw Jason scrub his hand over his face out of the corner of his eye.

"Jesus," said Jason, in a voice that Tim had never heard before. "I'm not that fragile."

"Yes you are," said Tim.

"I am not," Jason snapped back. "It's not like . . . Tim. Listen. I—"

He let out a long breath. Tim looked over at him, cataloging his reaction.

Jason stared off into nothing. He looked both older than he was and much, much younger: sad, and lost.

"I'm not good at this," Jason said, still not looking at Tim. "I messed this up, okay? My whole life . . . is fucked up. And I don't know how to get it back."

Tim didn't say anything.

Jason shifted a little, ran a hand through his hair. "Everybody knew me, before. Except you. And I can't tell if that makes it better or worse, because you have nothing to compare this to. Compare *me* to."

"I don't know. I think I like this version of you better than the version that was actively hunting me down and getting into altercations with Batman every other week," Tim offered.

Jason huffed a genuine laugh. He flashed Tim a quick, searching look. "I get it, okay? I know it's not your fault. I'm not . . . Pit-mad, the way I was before. But I'm not that kid anymore, either."

Jason was repeating things he'd screamed at Tim during their fight, but now, with the quiet, forlorn solemness, it somehow felt like a completely different conversation.

He added abruptly, "I was better. Before. And I don't want your life. I

wanted mine."

Tim thought about how much it must have hurt, then. Dying, and then trying to go home, and then realizing things were too different for that to happen the way you wanted it to.

Tim had tried to go home, too, often enough. It was difficult, when you were the wrong shape for the home you wanted.

"You think about things longer than anybody I've ever met," said Jason, "Except Bruce. You both do this thing where you just sit there and think about what people have said for a weirdly long time."

Tim looked over at him, blinking. "Really?"

"Yeah."

"Just . . . " Tim shrugged. "Trying to understand, I guess."

Jason looked at him for a long time, then nodded once and folded his arms over his knees, looking up at the octopus. He said, "Also I still went to the Manor when you were there. So. It wasn't like it was actually . . . "

"Yeah, but you always left the room when I walked in it," Tim pointed out, "because you hate me."

"Do we have to rehash this again? I do not hate you."

"Well, I know that now," said Tim.

Jason tipped his head a little. They were quiet again for several minutes more before Jason said, haltingly, "Because you never knew me before I didn't know how to tell you . . . I just figured you'd never forgive me for what I did, while I was . . . crazy." Jason's hands curled on the last word, mouth turning down in a viciously unhappy twist.

Tim thought about jabbing *Well, I still think you're crazy,* but he had a feeling that that one wouldn't land the way he wanted it to. So he said, "Well, Damian tried to off me a few times, and I got over it. So."

Jason's head swiveled. "Excuse *me?"*

Tim shrugged. "It's a gift," he tried to say airily, but it came out a little too forced for his liking.

"Did he apologize?" Jason sounded . . . *affronted.*

“Are *you* apologizing?” Tim countered testily. He didn’t like rehashing his and Damian’s past. It was a private affair: a strange country full of strange roads with bumps and bruises that other siblings would never have, but it was honest, and it was theirs. They had hurt each other, him and Damian, but it didn’t matter, because they were brothers for real now, and as prickly as Damian was, Tim had learned to understand him, and he loved Damian as much as Damian loved him.

Jason said, “Yes.”

Tim looked at him. Jason looked back, and it was the most unsure expression Tim had ever seen on his face.

“Okay,” Tim said.

It made him look young, Tim realized. The way his face looked just then.

Because he is *young,* was the thought that was fast on its heels. *He’s not that much older than you.* Grief and pain and anger made people older than they were. Tim knew all about that.

“Okay,” Jason said.

They sat with that for a minute.

Jason said, “And anyway. The issue isn’t with you, it’s with . . . it’s . . .” Jason waved his hand around in a way that would not have meant a single thing to anybody who wasn’t part of their family. “You know.”

“Maybe you should . . . ”

“What?” Jason snapped.

But Tim found that he had more patience for Jason’s anger just then. “He isn’t perfect,” Tim said. “But he is always there.”

Jason muttered, “Not always,” but there was a preoccupied look in his eyes as he stared off into the tunnels.

Something inside of Tim twisted, the way it had all those years ago, when Bruce had told him about Jason. Of course Tim had known—the whole world had known that Bruce Wayne had lost his second child—but it was different, hearing about it from Bruce himself. Hearing in Bruce’s voice about what Jason and Bruce had had, before it was all ripped away.

Jason said, “Is it *snowing?”*

Tim pulled himself back into the present. He sat up, wincing a little.

It was. Fat white flakes were drifting through the opening to their right, slow and lazy, and even as Tim watched, he felt a gust of cold wind raise goosebumps on his neck.

He and Jason exchanged a glance. Jason got to his feet.

“Stay here,” Jason told him.

Tim rolled his eyes and followed him, both of them creeping silently to the uneven edge of the doorway.

Jason swore at Tim under his breath when he noticed Tim coming after him anyway. After a very short glaring contest, both of them peered around the doorway, both of them with hands closed around weapons.

The doorway opened up, and out. It was outside—at least the outside that the Labyrinth taunted them with—sudden and wondrously beautiful in a way that made Tim’s chest ache with longing. *God,* he wanted the sun.

Through the doorway was a meadow, green as anything, grasses rippling gently. A single tree grew huge and majestic, millions of leaves fluttering in an unseen breeze, branches thick and waving. Though it looked like a spring day, warm and bubbly and bright, snow was blowing in big blowsy drifts through the air.

Sitting underneath the tree was Rhea, in that odd, long white dress. She looked radiantly happy, so much so that it took Tim a long moment to recognize her.

In her arms was a little girl of no more than seven, with white-blond hair done in a long, intricate braid.

Rhea was laughing and rocking and speaking happily with her, and every so often, she kissed the little girl’s face. The little girl giggled, chattering back, face scrunching up in delight. From what Tim could hear, it wasn’t a language he’d ever heard before, but the emotion was easy to read.

“Is that . . . are we looking at one of Rhea’s tests?” Jason sounded uncertain.

“Probably,” muttered Tim. “That little girl is probably going to strangle her or something in a minute.”

They both waited for the punchline of the lovely fairytale scene. It didn’t come; minutes passed; the little girl continued to laugh; Rhea stroked the child’s hair, rocked her back and forth. Something about it made Tim want to goddamn cry.

“Remember what Marion said,” Jason murmured, eyes laser-focused on Rhea.

Tim did. And according to every instinct he’d ever had, every tactical maneuver he’d ever made, they should kill her while she was distracted. Jason should pull out his gun, and they would win the race by virtue of being the only competitors. It was simple logic.

Neither of them moved. The snow blew gentle and soft, thick as flower petals, and Rhea and the child sat under the tree of some forgotten, nonexistent place, and Tim and Jason didn’t do anything to them.

“You think that’s her daughter?” Jason asked, and there was that same strange, longing sadness in his voice that was lurking in Tim’s throat.

“Yeah, probably,” said Tim. “This place . . . you know what it does.”

They watched for minutes longer, interlopers looking in, watching a joy unfamiliar to both of them. Neither of them had ever been taught the language of mothers.

“Come on,” said Tim, after a long time.

They left, returning to their camp, and slept back to back that night.

The Labyrinth closed the doorway between them and Rhea, and Rhea saw it. She saw the two boys leaving her in peace, too late. They could have shot her dead, and she would not have known it until it was happening.

She considered this for a long time, rocked her long-lost daughter back and forth. Then she sang a lullaby no one had heard in hundreds of years, soothing herself, the child, and the Labyrinth.

The Labyrinth watched. It was learning. It had almost known what the two boys would do before it presented them with the opportunity, but watching it happen unwound another tangled, savage heartstring.

More unseen ghosts trapped within the walls were released, their terrible last moments fading from time.

Silia felt it that time, because she was watching for it. And she was frightened.

Sparrow, she comforted herself. *No one gets past Sparrow*.

* * *

The next morning—or as *morning* as it could get when one couldn't see the sun—Tim woke earlier than Jason.

He rolled up quietly out of his bedroll, walked quickly away from their camp, and rounded the corner. When he was a safe distance away, he knelt down and retched, throwing up until nothing but the sharp taste of bile was left.

When he was done heaving, he rolled away from his vomit and lay on the ground, shaking, chills wracking his body, hands clammy and damp.

Without sitting up, he curled over himself and pulled his bandage back enough that he could see the neat wound in his side.

It was still precisely stitched, and Tim knew that Jason had cleaned it well enough that infection shouldn't have taken hold. And it hadn't, because this wasn't infection; black veins were spreading out from the inflamed wound, unnatural and eerie to look at on his own body.

He replaced the bandage and curled up on the hard, cold floor, still shivering.

In his heart, he'd suspected that this was going to happen.

There was nothing for it; his only hope was getting home, where his only hope after *that* was somehow finding an antidote to an unknown poison that was affecting him in an unknown way.

The chances of that, he knew, were very small.

After a while, he dragged himself up, forced himself back to camp. Jason was still sleeping, face untroubled in sleep, hands unfurled. Tim took a long drink of water and slid back into his sleeping bag as quietly as he could manage.

He closed his eyes. There was no point in telling Jason, either, because

it wouldn't make anything go faster, and it wouldn't help them win. In fact, it might hinder them. Best to just walk through it and hope that they won in time.

* * *

Bruce was in his study when Clark knocked at his window.

Clark came in when Bruce waved his permission and landed gently, jerking on his jacket. It wasn't that he was cold, though it was snowy and frigid outside; Bruce had learned that Clark fidgeted with his clothing when he was stressed about something.

Clark had texted before coming. *Just want to pop by. Nothing to report.* He had done this out of kindness, because he knew Bruce well. If he had shown up without announcement, the way he usually did, Bruce might think that he knew something about his missing sons.

Clark skipped his usual chatter. "How are you?"

Bruce couldn't decide if he was glad to see Clark or not. "Thanks for taking Damian," he said instead, shuffling papers to the side to give his hands something to do. "He needed to be . . . out of the house."

"He and Jon are still up," Clark told him.

Bruce glanced up. "Doing what?"

Clark shrugged. "Talking. Lois won't go to sleep until they do. She's watching for Conner, too."

Bruce sighed. "There's nothing Conner can do. I'm sorry that he won't come home."

"Tim's his best friend. Anyway, he stopped by the house the other day to sleep and eat."

"He say anything?"

Clark flashed a sad, tired smile. "Not to me. He doesn't like talking to me when he's upset. It makes him . . . more upset, I think."

"Teenagers," muttered Bruce, out of habit, as though that wasn't the case with literally every single one of his children.

"Anyway. Damian doesn't want to stay with us for long, but it'll give him . . . something to do, anyway. Came by to see if you needed

anything. Lois wants to know if you're eating."

"I understand why she and Alfred get along so well," said Bruce. "I'm fine."

Clark said, "Sure you are."

Bruce let out a very slow breath through his nose.

"Have we considered the possibility of an alternate universe?" Clark asked. "If you and your entire family can't find them, along with two superhero teams . . . "

"If it's an alternate universe we're looking for," Bruce said, voice controlled and too cold, "it'll be like finding a needle in a haystack." As though he hadn't considered every possibility, from reasonable to insane. As though he hadn't walked back through every interaction that night. What had his last words been to Tim, to Jason? Something throwaway. He should have . . .

He should have done a lot of things.

Clark put a hand on his shoulder.

Bruce patted his hand once. "Do me a favor," he said, "and go hug your kids for me."

"If you need . . ." Clark sighed. "Just call me. I'll listen for it. And I'll keep looking."

"Thank you, Clark," said Bruce, still not meeting his eyes. Clark couldn't give him what he needed. "I appreciate it. Really. Thanks again for Damian."

"Dick is downstairs," Clark said to him, "Just so you know."

Bruce nodded.

Clark squeezed Bruce's shoulder gently, and then he was gone, the window snicking shut behind him, cold wind slashing into the room and back out again.

Bruce stood up and left his study, intending to go find Dick—although, upon reflection, he wasn't sure that was the best idea.

It makes him more upset, Clark had said.

He had begun to see that old anger seething in Dick's eyes, the resentful fury that built up when Dick felt helpless or out of control. He was intimately familiar with that anger—it had haunted him for two decades of his life—but now when he saw it in his children, it made him want to plead with them. He knew too much, he knew how anger stole from you—your life, your joy—the family you had left.

He flipped on the light, and the hallway lit gently against the night, the cold pressing in at the windows.

It was not the way to the clock, but his steps carried him here often through the days, even when no one was there: the bedrooms down the hall.

He touched Dick's lightly as he passed. Down and across from Dick's, he held out his hand and rested his fingers on Jason's old doorknob.

Almost without thinking about it, he went inside.

It was dark, the light faint from where the moon reflected off the bright snow. The curtains were open, the way they always were, because Jason had pinned them that way—he hated the dark, and he'd never once drawn them.

Jason had not been back here since he'd returned, so it still looked like what it had been when he had been fifteen: faded photographs tacked up in strange places, books stacked on the nightstand—a bookmark near the end on the third one down—a Wonder Woman nightlight gathering dust, long since gone dark, the glow stars stuck determinedly to the ceiling still keeping their vigil. The large armchair still had a tear in the back from where Jason had been playing with a knife and thrown it. There was a laundry hamper in the closet that had held Jason's dirty clothes for a year after he died, until Alfred had gently put his foot down and done the laundry, including the sheets that had still been rumpled from the last morning Jason had woken up. So now the clothes were neatly packed away, the bed fastidiously made, except for the one spot on the edge that was mussed, and stayed mussed, because that was where Bruce always sat when he came in here.

He sat there now, in the dark. Jason's books, still piled haphazardly on their shelves, made odd shapes in the gloom.

Bruce knew he should have come in and cleaned it out long ago, especially after Jason had lost his Pit madness and made reluctant peace with the family. He should have packed it all up and shipped it

to Jason to do what he would with it all; they were his possessions, after all.

But he didn't, because all of it here reminded him of that little boy he'd once known—his boy in the bedroom down the hall.

Jason was still his boy, he knew that. Bruce saw him still, sometimes, the young glimmers through the sarcastic, steely mask that he wore all the time. It was just that sometimes, Bruce had trouble with where to put his grief—grief for someone who had come back but had come back differently; where to put his overwhelming relief, for someone who had come back but come back differently. Dinah had nailed it into his head again and again: *You say he is your son and you still love him? Prove it. Prove to him he's your son. You can't keep wanting him to be someone he won't ever be again. You'll just push him away and hurt him more if you expect something of him he can't ever achieve.*

But there were some things even Dinah couldn't help him with. *How do I get my son to come home. How do I take away that anger in his eyes. How do I keep him from pulling further away. How do I make my son happy.*

He just didn't know how to say it. Jason avoided him like he was the plague; he wouldn't sit in the same room with Bruce for longer than two minutes together; how was he to say that he still loved Jason just the way he was, that he wanted him back no matter how different he was, that it wasn't Jason who had failed, it was *him,* that he was so, so sorry, that he—

He should have tracked Jason down and made him listen. He should have asked him to listen. He should have typed a goddamn email. Because now, he might have lost him again.

He left the room. Entered another one.

Tim's room was still a disaster, no dust anywhere; he hadn't had time to disappear yet—the posters on his wall, the college applications strewn over the desk combined with top-of-the-line chemistry set, equations scrawled in Tim's cramped handwriting on post-it notes littering the floor, the drawers. Several mugs littered the room, some of them with cold coffee still in them; clothes thrown over his desk chair, his bed, a sweatshirt tossed hastily over the floor lamp. The bedclothes were strewn half over the floor, pillows shoved into the pile that Tim liked to sleep on, a laptop perched precariously on the edge of the bed.

Tim. Where are you?

Coming back.

That was it. That was the last thing they'd said to each other. *Coming back,* Tim had promised.

Then come back, Tim.

Things he should have said to Tim all bubbled up at once.

He gently reached over and pulled the sweatshirt off the floor lamp, folding it absentmindedly. He didn't sit on the bed, because if he did that, he'd start wondering if this laundry would be undone a year from now because he couldn't stand to come in here, either, if this was the moment that time began to erase his third son as well as his second, until there was nothing left but what Bruce remembered.

He tried not to wish that he could just go back to two weeks ago, when Tim was hanging upside down on that very bed, complaining to Bruce about the dumb referees of the basketball game they'd just finished watching. If he started thinking about how much he wanted to just turn back the clock, it would consume him.

God, he couldn't bear this.

"Master Bruce?"

Bruce turned. Forced a smile. "Just checking on something."

Alfred's stare was heavy with understanding. "Of course, Master Bruce."

Bruce set the folded sweatshirt gently on the edge of Tim's bed. "You shouldn't be up so late. Where's Cass?"

"I am quite capable of getting the rest I need," Alfred clucked. Bruce left Tim's room. He didn't miss the way Alfred looked in, staring at the lived-in clutter, the room that looked as if Tim had just left it, and would be back at any moment. "Miss Cassandra turned in after our game of chess."

Bruce put a hand on Alfred's shoulder. "I heard Dick was here."

"Hm. Perhaps he is. I haven't seen him up here."

There were still people who needed Bruce. He couldn't let himself sink

into grief like he had before; he still had children to protect, to try not to let down; he'd learned that much, at least, after the first time. He still had to show up for what was left of his family, had to try and save them from destroying their lives the way he'd nearly destroyed his.

And we don't know that this is the second time, he told himself firmly. *We don't.*

The cynical, logical side of him, the side that had lined up all the facts, scoffed wearily at him.

Alfred touched his shoulder in return, and they left, the two of them: unwilling survivors of too many of their loved ones, the heads of a household full of people they would do anything for. Alfred turned off the light, and the hallway of the bedrooms of their boys went dark.

Bruce went through the clock, down to the Cave.

He heard what Dick was doing before he saw him: the rhythmic *thwack thwack thwack* of fists hitting a punching bag.

"Bit late for training, isn't it," Bruce remarked, once he saw Dick.

Dick stopped punching the bag and held out his fists to catch it, keep it from swinging. He leaned his forehead against it briefly before turning around.

Sweat beaded his face. He'd been at it for a while. His expression was dark, closed off.

"Don't think you have any room to be judging my sleeping schedule," Dick told him coolly.

He began to unwrap his hands. Bruce waited.

Dick said, staring at the opposite wall, "Why'd you let Damian go to Metropolis?"

The attack came on an unexpected flank. "Because he wanted to go?"

There was acid in Dick's voice. "Oh, and if he disappears too, what are you going to do then?"

Ah. "He's got two supers watching him."

Dick whirled. "And *we* were all at the gala. How do you know how to

stop it from happening again if we don't know how it happened in the first place?"

"If I acted as though an unseen force would snatch any of my children or friends at any given moment, I would never let any of you go anywhere," Bruce told him, as rationally as possible.

"That doesn't mean you shouldn't watch your own kids."

"As a matter of fact, I *do* watch my own kids."

"Not well enough, apparently." Dick didn't allow time for this knife to finish its piercing before he snapped, "And stop behaving like it's been two years. It hasn't even been two *weeks."*

"How am I behaving like it's been two years?"

"You're not looking as hard."

"I don't know where else to *look,* Dick!"

"I bet you've already decided when you're going to announce that they're *dead—"*

"You're announcing that they're dead?"

The color drained from Dick's face. He fell back a step.

Bruce turned.

Jon was hovering in the air behind Damian, looking wildly uncertain, eyes huge. Damian was staring at Bruce as though Bruce had shot him. Both of them were in their pajamas.

"Do you truly believe that they are . . ." Damian couldn't finish. The strangled horror on his face was stark, vivid.

"No," said Bruce and Dick at the same time. Dick's body was rigid, frozen. Come to think of it, Bruce didn't think that Damian had never been in the blasting zone when Dick had exploded before. Dick would rather cut off his own hand than hurt Damian; this was far worse punishment than any talking-to Bruce could possibly give Dick later.

"Then why would you say that?" Damian stumbled away from Bruce. "Why would you announce that they're dead?"

"I wouldn't do that," Bruce told him. "And I'm not doing that."

Damian turned his streaked face to Dick. His words were bordering on a shriek. “Then *why would you say that?”*

Dick didn’t have an answer, and Bruce didn’t turn around to watch what was happening on his face. He walked over to Damian and put one hand on his head and one hand on his shoulder, blocking his view of Dick. Glancing up at Jon, he said, keeping his voice even and gentle, “Did you tell your dad you were taking Damian back?”

Guilt stole across Jon’s expression. He wore all of his emotions just like his father, splashed across his face. “No. He was talking to Mom and Conner. I didn’t want…Conner sounded really upset.”

Bruce’s instinct was to berate him, but he strangled the impulse. Jon took criticism much harder than other children his age, and after all—“No harm, no foul,” Bruce told him. “You won’t get lost on the way home?”

“No, sir,” Jon said, still sounding subdued even though Bruce hadn’t scolded him at all. “I could fly this trip in my sleep.”

“All right. Run along home and have Clark text me when you’re back.” They didn’t need any more lost children to contend with.

Jon nodded. “Bye, Dami.”

Damian didn’t say anything, staring off to the left, hands fisted. Jon bit his lip, and then flew off.

Running a hand through Damian’s hair, Bruce crouched. “No one thinks that,” said Bruce calmly, injecting as much confidence into his voice as he could muster—more, indeed, than he felt. “We’re all just a little uptight and upset because we haven’t found anything. But Tim and Jason are smart, and I didn’t raise two master fighters for nothing, hm?”

Damian didn’t say anything, but his face grew slightly less awful.

“Why are you back?” Bruce put his elbows on his knees. “You could have told me you didn’t want to go.”

“I did wish to go,” Damian assured him. “But then . . . I could not sleep. And then I was worried that someone would hear something and I would not learn of it until tomorrow morning.” He hesitated. “Father. What if they really are . . .”

Then the days would keep mercilessly marching onward, and nothing would stop even though their world would be blown apart. But he didn't say that. Life would teach Damian that without him ever having to say a word, and he hoped to God Damian wasn't going to learn that now. "We'll exhaust every option before we start considering that as a possibility," Bruce lied to him—everyone knew it was a *high* possibility at this point— "and we're a long way from having exhausted every option."

Damian thought for a long time about this, eyes dark and anxious. Finally, he allowed, "All right."

"Come on. It's bedtime."

Damian pulled a face. "Do I have to."

"Yes. It's time to start getting your sleeping schedule back on track. You have school in a week."

Damian, following after him, stopped dead. "You are going to make me go to school even though two of my brothers are missing?"

"If we find them beforehand," Bruce told him patiently, "you will be glad your sleep schedule has been fixed."

Damian scowled, but followed after him. "New Year's is this weekend. Is it not customary to stay up late on that night?"

"We'll worry about that this weekend," Bruce told him.

"Hmph," muttered Damian. "Good night, Richard."

Dick hadn't quite gotten himself together, so it was a good thing Damian wasn't looking back at him. Dick said, subdued, "Night, Dami."

Damian was getting a bit old to be properly tucked in, but Bruce sat on the edge of the bed and waited for Damian to clamber under the covers. Damian didn't lay down, though, twisting the bedsheets between his hands.

Bruce waited him out.

Damian's spine was rigid when he blurted, "I convinced Timothy to go after Jason."

Oh. This, Bruce understood. "Damian. Damian, look at me."

Damian did, after a long minute. His dark eyes were anguished, mouth turned down. Three years ago, this type of empathy would have been beyond him completely.

“When bad things happen to the people we love,” Bruce said, “our instinct is to find someone to blame. And if there isn’t anybody obvious to blame, we blame ourselves.”

Damian kept looking at him. Without the puffed-up confidence threaded through with arrogance, Damian looked very young.

“And you’re wrong,” said Bruce. “There isn’t anyone to blame except for the people who took them. The people actively doing harm. If you had known Tim wouldn’t come back, would you have sent him away?”

Damian shook his head violently.

“Then you aren’t to blame,” Bruce told him. “And there was nothing you could have done to stop it. If there was, you would have done it. So we move forward. We keep looking. Do you understand?”

Damian looked at him long and hard, searching, before sliding further under the covers. “I suppose you learned all of this the hard way.”

Bruce chuckled a little. “I sure did, chum. With the help of a therapist. Will you be okay for the night?”

Damian was quiet. “Why did Richard say that?”

Bruce sighed. “He’s angry. He’s worried. People say a lot of things they don’t mean when they’re angry and worried. I’ve said more than my fair share to him.”

Damian nodded, eyelids drooping. “I suppose that makes sense.” His eyes closed. “The house isn’t the same without Timothy.”

Bruce reached over and stroked his head. “I know. Good night, Damian.”

“Good night, Father.”

When Bruce went back downstairs, the lights were on in the kitchen. Dick was sitting on the table, feet on a chair, twisting his hands.

It could have been today, it could have been ten years ago, fifteen-year-old Dick sitting in exactly the same position. It helped Bruce find

his patience again.

He leaned against the doorjamb.

Looking at his hands, shoulders slumped, Dick said, “Is he asleep?”

“He’s fine,” Bruce said. “Stronger than he looks.”

Dick nodded. His misery was plain. “I didn’t mean . . . B, I’m sorry.”

Bruce went over to Dick, moved the chair, and curled both hands around the back of his skull. Dick rested his forehead against Bruce’s chest.

“I just . . . " Dick stopped.

“I know,” said Bruce.

When Dick began to cry, Bruce didn’t remark on it. He just stood there and held his first son until dawn edged the world in gold.

* * *

“You have got to be kidding me,” said Jason.

“I wish I had the control to be kidding you.”

Tim and Jason stood staring up, up, up. It was a cavern of untold height, soaring higher than a skyscraper. Sunlight trickled down to them from far above, like they were in a fish bowl.

In front of them was a curled, twisted dun-colored mountain, and carved sharply along the sides was a path, traveling clear up until it was out of sight, switching back and forth all the way up.

There was no way to go around it.

“Something, something, the sooner we get started, the sooner we get finished,” Tim said.

“Blah, blah, blah,” said Jason. “All right. Cool. When we get to the top I’m peeing off it.”

Tim just groaned at him, rolling his eyes.

“Don’t tell me you’re not tempted.”

“I’m not. Not even a little. Something’s gonna come up and bite your dick off.”

“I think I’d see it first.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Bitch . . .”

They began to climb. It would have been faster to climb vertically, but Tim quickly ruled out this idea as futile; the sides were just too sheer. Besides, hiking wasn’t the worst thing they’d done in the Labyrinth.

Tim had woken up for the second time feeling less like death microwaved, so he readjusted his earlier assessment. Maybe it was just a substance meant to slow down an enemy for a certain amount of time. Maybe it would be fine. He had eaten enough breakfast to tide him over but not upset his stomach again, and after a drink of water, it was just the deep ache in his side that was normal after a minor stabbing.

As they hiked, though, it got less fine. Tim’s stamina was such that he should have been able to do this in his sleep, but as a half an hour ticked by, an hour, ninety minutes, two hours, the ache in his side turned to a consistent, stinging burn.

The hike in and of itself wasn’t easy. The terrain was good, which was unexpected, but the trail itself was strange and steep. In some parts, the path was so narrow that one misstep would send them careening back to the bottom, and in contrast, some parts were nearly flat, wide enough for a car. It doubled, tripled back on itself in odd leaps, and it grew warm, nearly unbearably so. His backpack stuck to his back, and the longer they hiked, the heavier it felt.

His heart rate began to do uneven, strange jumps, and by the time two hours had passed, he was honestly ready to lay down and not get back up, which was why he bumped straight into Jason’s back.

“Would you watch where you’re going, pipsqueak? Do you hear that?”

Tim blinked, focusing. For the last thirty minutes, he’d zoned out in favor of keeping his feet moving. “Hear what?”

“You don’t hear—” Jason turned around. “Je *sus* , you’re pale.”

“This is just what color I am.”

“No, the fuck it is not, I have been looking at nobody but you for the past however-the-fuck many days,” Jason said. “Sit down. Take a break. You should’ve said something before, Tweedle-Dumb. Hang on.”

Tim was already sliding down the rock wall to the ground. “Does that make you Tweedle-Dee? Are you going somewhere?”

Jason went to the edge and leaned over, which made Tim queasy inside. “Something’s following us. It’s a few . . . levels . . . down? Is levels the right way to say that? Listen.”

Tim listened. Now that he wasn’t concentrating every ounce of his energy into staying upright, he could hear . . . something.

A rippling soft wave of thuds. Another sound layered on top: a quiet, periodic hiss.

Something with a lot of legs.

“Can you see it?” Tim asked. He pulled out his water bottle.

Jason leaned out further, then seemed to think better of it. Flattening himself to the ground on his stomach, he weaseled closer to the edge and peered over.

“Just drink your water,” said Jason, but there was a steely edge to his voice now.

“Yes, Mom,” muttered Tim.

Jason rolled back up into a sitting position, then dug around in his backpack. In several well-practiced motions, he braced one knee on the ground, then put an elbow on his other knee. A stark, blunt black .45 was in the hand he was steadying on his knee.

So he could see it. Tim waited.

Jason aimed, and then fired. Once, and then he paused. Twice. Pause. Three times. The sound cracked sharply through the air, echoing eerily in the cavern.

“Well?” Tim asked, after the last of the echoes had faded.

Jason stood up and stowed the .45. “Slowed it down. Didn’t kill it. The

top looks armored."

Tim spit a little of his water. " *Armored?* What the hell is it?"

"Bug. Big one."

Tim had seen enough of the *bugs* of the Labyrinth to imagine it. Horror prickled at him. "It can never just be one thing with this damn place. How many legs?"

Jason eyed him. It was a terribly calculating expression, and Tim unpicked it at once.

"It's fine," said Tim, crossly. "It just hurts a little." A lot. "Give me three minutes and I'll be good for another few hours." Probably a lie, but as Jason's face said, they really didn't have much of a choice. "Was it climbing the path we were or climbing straight up?"

"The trail," said Jason, glancing behind him. "So we're not as bad off as all that."

"Stop looking at me like that, then."

"Well, I'm not carrying you, so you'd better walk it the fuck off," said Jason, but he had spackled humor and confidence too thickly for Tim to be reassured.

Tim made a disdainful *tcha,* playing along. But fear had begun to nest inside of him. Once, he would have been worried that Jason would leave him for dead; now he was worried he wouldn't.

He felt compelled to say, "If it catches us . . ."

"Then we'll kill it, because we're both expert fighters, and I'm not about to die again to a fucking bug," Jason interrupted flatly, eyeing Tim with a fierceness that dared Tim to contradict him.

Tim said again, "How many legs?"

Jason squinted, tipped his head from side to side. "Give or take. Nine. There were ten but I shot one of them off."

Tim made a disgusted sound. "Gross. Armored on top? Bugs aren't usually armored all the way around. It probably has a soft underbelly."

"There's always some sort of weird spider fuckin thing," muttered

Jason, going back to the edge to look over.

Tim gave himself the allotted three minutes exactly, steeled himself, and shoved himself back to his feet. It was going to be worse this time around.

“Woah,” Jason protested.

“Oh, shut up. You know we don’t have time,” Tim said, wincing as he pressed a hand to his side. The skin felt hot even through his shirt, which did not bode well. “Come on.”

“An exacting pragmatist,” said Jason. “Great, there’s fucking two of you.”

They kept moving.

Jason did not try to speak to Tim again, to lighten the mood or otherwise, which was just as well, because Tim did not have the breath to answer him. He had been wrong; it was not worse this time; it was much, much, much, *much* worse.

Jason walked behind him, which made Tim all the more conscious that he was going much slower than he should have been. Every so often, he tuned out of his pain enough to listen to the volume of the creature following them, and every time, it was louder.

It wasn’t even an hour later when Tim had to stop, leaning against the side of the cliff, gasping. They were high in the air now, hundreds of feet up, but they weren’t close enough to the top.

Jason grabbed Tim’s arm. Caught him as his legs gave out. “Easy. Come on. Sit down.”

Black spots were dancing in front of Tim’s eyes. “Listen. You have to keep climbing.”

Jason didn’t let go. “You are legitimately insane if you think I’m just gonna drop you off here and keep going.”

“It’s getting too close.”

“You don’t know that.”

The creature timed its moment well; it leapt up from the cliffside next to them, perfectly proving Tim’s point; it lunged, huge and black and long; Tim had time to think that there were a truly *absurd* amount of

legs on it before Jason shoved him to the side, then attacked the thing himself.

Tim didn't land on his injured side, but he blacked out a little nevertheless, pain burning through him. When he came to, he didn't have the energy to do anything but lay there and gasp, sweat prickling all over him. He felt like he was getting stabbed again, over and over.

Jason wasn't doing terribly—he was a Bat, after all, and Bats didn't really do terribly in fights as a rule— but he wasn't making headway, either. The thing was for sure related to a spider in looks, with long spindly legs and a segmented body, but instead of a round head, it had a triangular one, black and carapaced and pointed. Every so often, that triangle would open to reveal rows and rows of needle-sharp teeth. The legs and head snapped at Jason.

Jason darted in to slash at it. It danced backwards, hissing like a snake. Its barbed legs whipped out at him, but he was too quick for any of them to touch him. When Jason stabbed for the underbelly, it simply shifted a lot of its legs and then it wasn't close to him anymore. It was five feet tall, easy, and much, much longer than that; its legs curved up and away, with one of them missing. Jason really had shot one off. When Jason stabbed at its back, the knife simply skittered right off with a metallic screech.

Tim hated these monsters. He wished they were facing something normal for once.

Tim was pulling himself together enough to help—somebody had to keep it distracted while somebody else stabbed it underneath—when the monster put itself between Jason and the wall.

Tim froze, horror crawling up his throat. He opened his mouth to shout—what, he wasn't sure—

But the creature struck, fast; Jason rolled; the creature did too; the legs grabbed at him enough, snagging his jacket—in an instant, the monster had used its body weight to shove—and Jason disappeared off the edge of the cliff with a shout. It happened in less than a second.

Tim heard himself scream Jason's name.

The monster turned back to him, fast as lightning, hissing wildly. The legs moved in tandem, and suddenly it was rushing at him, that triangular mouth opening wide.

He didn't have a second to think of what he was going to do when something dropped onto its back, something slender and white. Without ceremony, Rhea used the momentum from her jump to drive a long white spear directly into the back of the creature's skull.

It crumpled in a tangle of limbs. It didn't even have time to make a noise.

Tim scrambled a little. Heard himself make a horrible, jumbled noise. "I . . ."

He kept seeing Jason vanish.

"*TIM!"*

Tim blinked. Sweat dripped into his eye. He didn't have the breath to ask if he had hallucinated the voice, shouting from down below.

Rhea climbed off the corpse. In death, it looked so horrifying that it was cartoonish. A drawing of some child's nightmare. She crouched in front of him. "He fell onto the path below. It was wide enough to catch him. Do you understand?"

Tim sank back onto the ground until his head hit the dirt. Darkness kept rearing up to drag him down, but he fought it, panic warring with pain. He could hear himself breathing: harsh, fast, uneven.

Jason rounded the corner an instant later, out of breath, dusty, alive, alive, alive. His eyes were violent. "Get the fuck away from him."

Rhea turned. "This is the first time I have ever been relieved to see a competitor escape death."

"I said *get away from him."* Jason's whole body was wound to the utmost, but he didn't step any closer.

Distantly, Tim realized that it was because Rhea was close enough to slit his throat if she wanted to. Jason was afraid to make any sudden moves because Rhea could kill Tim in an instant.

Rhea shrugged elegantly. She stood, moving away from Tim.

The second she was far enough away, Jason moved. In an instant, he was kneeling by Tim, gently shifting him onto his back, gripping his shoulders, the sides of his head. "Hey. Hey. Tim. Look at me. I said look at me, shithole. Okay? Jesus *Christ,* you're burning. *Fucking* hell.

What the fuck are you doing?"

This last sentence was directed at Rhea, who had shifted behind Jason. Jason had a knife in his hand faster than Tim could blink.

Tim struggled. He was going to stay awake. He couldn't do this now.

But every second he was drifting. Words were stringing together in ways that didn't make sense to him. His whole body felt weighed down with concrete.

He watched Rhea shrug, and it felt as though he were watching her from underwater. "A life for a life. You allowed me the time with my daughter. I will allow you time with him before he dies."

"He isn't going to die." Jason's words were an animal's snarl.

Tim was sorry he was going to leave Jason alone.

"I will travel with you to the top. It seems our tests have intersected. Come, now. I will walk in front of you."

"And why would you do that? I could kill you." Jason's voice was hard, cold. It left no room for doubt.

"You could. And I could kill you. But you will be busy carrying him, and I . . . I grow tired of death, these days. My daughter's spirit . . . she reminded me of a time when there was not . . . this." Her voice was quiet. She said again, "Come. There will be other creatures soon. There always are."

There was a long pause.

Tim tried to say something. But he was already slipping under.

Somebody was lifting him. The ground was falling away. The shifting jostled his stab wound, but the pain was muffled. His head fell against someone's shoulder.

You said you weren't going to carry me, Tim would have snarked, if he had any control over his body.

The darkness dragged him down, and Tim fell into it, the pain following him all the while.

Chapter 8

Jason carried Tim to the top of the cliffs.

It took another hour. Rhea didn't say anything to him the entire time, carrying Tim's pack slung over her shoulder. She didn't appear to have any possessions at all except that odd, long white spear.

He could hear things coming up the mountain behind them, and occasionally, if he looked over the edge, he could see them—black and many-legged and horrible. They were far enough away, though, that they didn't worry him for the moment.

What *did* worry him was Tim.

Carrying Tim in his arms wasn't the most efficient way to hold him while walking, but Jason was too afraid to carry him on his back, or over his shoulder. He kept envisioning something piercing Tim's skull while it was exposed. Besides, he was strong enough that it was feasible, if not harder than it would have been. So Tim's head lolled against Jason's shoulder, face beaded with sweat, lips colorless. Jason could feel him burning with fever through his shirt. Tim twitched uneasily every so often, but he didn't wake back up.

This was ten kinds of wrong; stab wounds didn't do this, especially stab wounds as shallow as the one Tim had gotten, especially after they had been cleaned as thoroughly as Jason had cleaned Tim's. They hurt, sure, but this was a new kind of animal: Jason had no idea if it was the Labyrinth, or Tim's fucked immune system, or some awful combination of the two.

Either way—if Tim died while they were stuck here . . .

The top was a flat plateau, nearly a mile across. They walked half a mile before Jason said, voice cold, "I'm stopping here. Thanks for not killing us, or whatever." He felt Tim jerk slightly at the sound of his voice, but he didn't open his eyes.

She looked around for a long time. "There is no door for either of us. I will wait here with you."

"I'd actually rather you didn't."

Rhea behaved as though he hadn't spoken. "What is the matter with

him?"

Jason glared. "He was stabbed."

"A stabbing does not accomplish this. Infection?"

"I cleaned it pretty soon after he got it."

Rhea's expression cleared. Something like anger darkened her features, her fingers curling, and for the first time, Jason saw the woman she really was: a weary, bitter old prisoner.

He remembered when she had told them that she had been here for centuries. It hadn't made any impact on him then—he had had no idea what the Labyrinth was—but now the thought made him cold to his bones.

Rhea said, "Silia. She has been meddling. It will get dark soon. I will build a fire while you tend him."

Jason didn't move, shifting Tim a little in his arms. "Lady. We'll just kill each other as soon as one of our backs is turned. What's the point of this?"

"Our tests have aligned," she repeated, looking up at him as she set Tim's pack down. "For at least a time, we are here together. I told you: I have no wish to fight. I never attack the other competitors if I can help it. It . . . there is no point to it. This place is hell enough by itself." She untied Tim's bedroll and unrolled it. Straightening suddenly, she held still, eyes focused on nothing.

Jason listened, too, tensing.

Silence.

"There," said Rhea. "Nothing is following us. The trail behind us has probably vanished as well. What next, I do not know." She gestured to the bedroll. "I will go to look for anything out there, clue or foe. I promise I will not kill you now, Jason Todd. We will live to go our separate ways in the morning, even if he does not." She glanced at Tim. Her elegant, alien face was emotionless. This was fact to her. It wouldn't affect her in any way.

"If he dies," said Jason, voice empty, "I'll kill you in the morning."

She waved a hand, allowing this; terrifyingly unperturbed. "Our truce

lasts til morning, then."

Without looking back, she strode off across the plateau.

Jason laid Tim down. Pulled up Tim's shirt, braced himself, and ripped off the bandages.

Tim screamed, once. The sound tore into Jason's spine.

Jason shoved a hand against Tim's shoulder, keeping him from rising. "The *fuck,* Tim."

Tim gasped, gasped again. He'd come awake from the pain, but he wouldn't stay that way for much longer; his blinks were already long and slow. "Didn't think . . ."

"Yeah, that's obvious," Jason snapped, heart in his throat.

The skin around the stitches was red and angry, eerie blueish black veins spidering out from the wound. Nothing like an ordinary infection, but an infection nevertheless. So it was Labyrinth fuckery.

Jason let out a slow breath, then reached for the first aid kit again. A slender pair of needle-thin scissors was in his hand a moment later.

"Tim. I've got to drain this, okay? It's . . . going to hurt, okay, stay with me here. On three."

"On two, you mean," Tim mumbled.

Jason cut. Tim screamed again, the sound thin and strangled.

Jason tried to block it out. He had to do it; knew exactly what to do. He *had* to.

Tim's hands scrabbled uselessly at his bedroll, but the rest of his body was tensed and unmoving; Tim had his own training he was falling back on. His chest heaved, his head arched backwards, but he kept his torso and his legs still.

Jason cleaned the wound again. He restitched it. He bandaged it again.

"I'm so sorry," he said as he did it, and he was: more sorry than he'd ever been in his life. "Tim, I'm sorry."

Tim was shivering by the time Jason was finished. Tim said, voice

strained, “It’s okay. It’s okay. Please tell me it’s over.”

Jason blew out a breath. Swallowed, hard. Kept his voice even. “Come on. Drink this. Careful. Come here.”

He slid an arm under Tim’s shoulders and helped him take a few gulps of water, then pulled the sleeping bag top up and over him.

“Rhea,” said Tim, peering blearily up at Jason. “Wasn’t she here?”

“She’s . . . scouting. We’re trying to find a way out of here, okay?”

Tim’s eyes closed. “‘M tired.”

“Yeah, I know. You can go to sleep, okay?” He pushed Tim’s hair out of his eyes and looked around. Rhea’s tall, slender form was heading back toward them.

Jason slid his hand down to Tim’s wrist to find the weak, rapid pulse there. Tim was in no way, shape or form helpless, ever, but just then, his bones felt frail. Snappable.

By the time Jason looked back at Tim, he was asleep again, cheeks flushed with fever, chest jumping unevenly.

It took another ten minutes for Rhea to make it all the way back, and when she did, she was, somehow, holding a stack of kindling. She knelt down and began assembling it on the dry sandstone. “Nothing. I don’t know what it wants of us now.”

True to Rhea’s word, it did get dark soon, the unseen light source dimming until it really was like night. Rhea built a large fire and fed it in the hours that followed with a strangely continuous supply of firewood. To Jason’s wary relief, she didn’t try to speak to him.

Other than the crackling and snapping of the fire, it remained eerily quiet. Jason’s ears prickled at even the suggestion of a sound, but nothing appeared, friend or foe. With nothing but the flickering firelight to push back the creeping gloom, it began to feel like they were the only people in the world.

We are, Jason realized suddenly, disturbed. With Rhea, they were the only people alive in this entire place.

The hours passed agonizingly slowly. Jason had never felt so helpless in his life.

Sometimes Jason's anger felt like a separate entity from him, a rabid dog that was never satisfied. Its canines had been dulled down for a few days, but now it reared its ugly head, sharpening its teeth on his bones. He was furious: at himself, at Tim, at Rhea, at the Labyrinth. He seethed uselessly with it, worry and rage burning a pit through his stomach.

Tim's sleep worsened as his fever did. He started twitching uneasily, shivering, eyebrows furrowed. Sweat stood out on his forehead.

Jason forced acetaminophen with water down Tim's throat and put cold water on a bunched up t-shirt to slide under his neck. He wondered what type of antibiotics they gave him back at the Cave. It was useless to imagine, but he wished he'd paid better attention to what was going on with Tim's immune system.

Across the flickering flames, Rhea watched them both, face impassive and strange. Her gaze was heavy and focused, but after a few hours, Jason tuned it out. He was too tired to care.

The night crept pitilessly onward. Jason began to nod off against his own will, exhaustion and worry weighing him down to the ground.

Eventually, Rhea laid down and put her back to both the boys and the fire. She didn't move again.

He was dozing lightly when Tim started murmuring uneasily to himself, fingers opening and closing in an absentminded, troubled way, shifting in his sleep.

Jason woke up properly, watching him.

With a choked, awful gasp, Tim tore awake, hands clawing back his sleeping bag. His eyes were huge, wild, unseeing. He sat up, straight as a board, mouth open in a desperate attempt to get oxygen.

"Tim. *Tim."* Jason grabbed one of Tim's shoulders to keep him from getting up, wincing at the twinge in his own muscles that had fallen asleep. "It's okay, all right? You're okay. You're okay."

Tim was still gasping, eyes staring off into nothing, expression blown apart. He didn't look as if he'd heard a single word that Jason had said.

"Tim." If he was gonna get punched, he was gonna get punched. He took Tim's head between his hands and forced Tim to look at him.

“Look at me. *Hey.* Stop it. *Stop.”*

Tim tried to say something, but he had to stop to cough, choke. Jason gave him a little shake, shoved down his own terror. At least Tim was looking at him.

“Heyheyhey. Try to take one deep breath for me. Just one, you can manage that, right?” He made his voice purposefully patronizing, annoying.

Tim looked at him. He didn’t appear to be registering anything Jason was saying, but the next breath was deeper.

“Good. Yeah. Get enough breath in you to tell me I’m a piece of shit, why don’t you.” Jason stroked his thumb across Tim’s hot temple. “Come on, Tim. Breathe, okay?”

Tim reached up and fastened his hand around Jason’s wrist, so that it was Jason holding Tim holding Jason.

“I—” Tim stopped, breathed. “I don’t—I don’t want to do this anymore. I don’t want to do this anymore I don’t—” His head began to shake back and forth, breaths coming faster again. His skin was so damp and hot it actually made Jason’s heart stutter in fear.

“I know,” said Jason. “I know I know I know. Okay? Shh. Lay back down. Come on. Come on. Drink some water.”

Tim drank some water. When Jason laid him back down, he stared up at the ceiling at nothing, eyes huge in his head, until Jason rubbed his hand back and forth over Tim’s shoulder, hard enough that there was pressure but not hard enough to hurt. It was only when Tim’s eyes had closed again that Jason realized that after he had had nightmares, Bruce had done the very same thing for him.

The rush of longing was so powerful it was shocking, blinding. He wanted Bruce so bad he could have goddamn cried. Bruce would have known what to do, and Jason *just didn’t.* He was all alone in here with Tim and he had *no idea* what he was supposed to do next.

For some reason, when he looked up and met the eyes of his younger self, he wasn’t surprised.

In the flickering firelight, his younger self looked at him with the same large sadness that was stabbing at Jason from the inside.

This younger self shouldn't be here. His younger self had had Bruce, had had a family, and this fifteen-year-old should still have Bruce. His fifteen-year-old self had had the world at his fingertips, and sometimes he remembered that, that feeling of being whole. It was wrong for this fifteen-year-old to be here, with him, while he was broken. They couldn't exist together.

"Tell me how to fix this." It wasn't what he had wanted to say, but it was what he said. His voice did not sound like his. "I don't care what you are, or what you want, or what you'll make me do. Just help me fix this."

His younger self inclined his head. He said, "Okay. Come with me."

Jason tightened his hand on Tim's shoulder, horror rising in him. "I can't—"

"Nothing's going to happen to him," younger Jason told him. "Nothing is here to hurt him. You can't make him better anyway."

Jason hesitated. Clenched his teeth, held tightly on to Tim, who was fevering enough that if he had been in their world he would have been in the emergency room. There was no way Tim would make it without some sort of miracle.

Rhea still slept. If she woke up she could decide to kill Tim while he was helpless.

There wasn't a good decision, but Jason still had to decide.

He forced himself to let go of Tim. He stood up and walked after his younger self, away from the fire, away from Tim, and into the darkness.

Jason had no idea how long they walked. He could barely make out the slim shoulders of his younger self.

Eventually, though, he heard rushing water.

A river came into sight all at once, a silvery ribbon rushing through the nothingness. Fireflies flickered along its banks, meandering lazily through the air, illuminating just enough.

Beside the river was a man with his back to the Jasons.

But no—as they got closer, it became apparent that it was barely a

man. The shadow of one. The memory of one. He was large, muscular, with thick black hair in braids. As they approached, the man turned. The edges of him were blurred, an out-of-focus photograph.

He spoke to the younger Jason first. His voice was a low, powerful rumble. “Thank you, little one.”

The younger Jason shrugged expansively, chirped, “Sure, sir,” and between one blink and the next was gone.

Sure, sir. Jason almost laughed. He had said that a lot, once. It was half sarcastic and half not. That one had always made Bruce laugh because nobody could figure out if Jason was being mocking or serious. The fact of the matter was that it depended on who he was talking to.

“So he is a Labyrinth thing,” Jason said, almost to himself. “And I guess you are too. So what now? You turn into a giant monster and we, what. Kill each other like civilized people?”

The man rumbled a brief, powerful laugh, then looked at him strangely. “That young thing. The younger impression of you. He is not born of the Labyrinth. He came in with you.”

Jason raised one eyebrow. “I think I’d remember if I was getting haunted by my fucking younger self.”

“This place brings our memories to life,” the man pointed out. “Our pasts. Our fears. Things we cannot let go of. You are haunted, then, by what you once were.”

Jason didn’t say anything.

The man turned to look at the river, flowing in from nothing and flowing out again to nothing. “There is a woman, a spirit here. Silia. She wants me to kill you.”

He said it in a way that was sure and calm. Whatever he was, he knew he could kill Jason. And Jason believed him.

Jason repeated, “So what happens now?”

His brain unspooled the ending: him, dead here and now. Tim dead by morning to whatever thing was cooking his brain. Rhea, the victor. Their family, never knowing a thing, eventually giving them up for dead.

The man looked over at him. His eyes were dark and solemn, piercing. They were the only clear thing about him. “Now? Come and sit and tell me something.”

Jason blinked. “Fucking pardon?”

He didn’t seem troubled by Jason’s belligerence. “Come. Sit.”

Jason was dead either way. Probably. Still, he put a healthy amount of distance between them and sat by the river.

Jason allowed about fifteen seconds of silence before he said, “Tell you what?”

Sue him. Patience had never once been his strong suit.

The man looked at him for a long moment. “You may call me Sparrow,” he said. His voice was so low and commanding that it reverberated in Jason’s chest.

“Okay, Sparrow. Why does Silia want us dead?” What Jason remembered of Silia didn’t quite match up with a vindictive serial killer, but according to both a comment from Rhea and now this guy, Silia was going to a whole lot of effort to kill both him and Tim.

If this were Gotham, he’d track her down and kill her before she could hurt them. As it was, the fact that she was already dead threw a wrench in that plan, along with the fact that the Labyrinth controlled literally every move they made.

“She is afraid of what is happening to this place, because of you,” said Sparrow.

“And . . . what’s happening because of us?” Jason had a hard time believing the Labyrinth was being affected by two tiny humans. That was like being affected by two cheerios.

Sparrow looked at him again. “Silia has a modicum of control over what happens in the Labyrinth because she can open windows to the mortal world. Not doorways, you understand. Just glimpses. Glances. And all of us would do anything for that, Jason Todd.” He stared into the river. “The Labyrinth can only give us cheap imitations of what we all once had: the wind on our faces. The freedom to go where we chose. The companionship of others.” He was quiet for a time, watching the strange, silky river spin its course. “The spirits here would do anything for a bit of light.”

Jason was beginning to feel that, and he hadn't even been here a couple hundred years, or however long the spirits here had been here.

"But there is a different kind of light that I want now," Sparrow said, "And in return, I will not kill you, and I will save the other one." He looked past Jason. Nodded to himself. "Your brother. I will save your brother."

Two weeks ago Jason would have been hissing and spitting with rage if anyone had referred to Tim as his brother. Now, he just said warily, "You can do that?"

"Silia has her influence here. So do I. The Labyrinth . . . grants requests, sometimes. It is a fickle beast. But sometimes if one asks, it answers."

It wasn't a lot to go on. But it was all Jason had. "Fine. Whatever. I still don't know what you want."

"Light," Sparrow said. "Stories are light in the darkness. Memories. I want you to give me your memories."

Jason snorted to disguise his unease. "Listen. You don't want to hear about my life. It's not a pretty one."

Sparrow looked at him. He didn't seem bothered by Jason's misunderstanding. "You have had two."

Jason threw up his hands. "How do you people all know everything—it's creepy as *fuck*. Yes, I've had two. Whatever. Lot of good it did me. Now I'm living with all the fucking consequences, and I can't be who I was."

"No," Sparrow agreed. "You cannot bring back what was lost. But that is not what this second life of yours was for anyway."

"Oh, yeah?" Jason's anger reared up its ugly head. "And what exactly *is it* for?"

"What all second things are for," Sparrow replied. "Another chance."

This put a neat dart in Jason's rage, and it all spilled out of him as quickly as it had come.

Sparrow said, "I don't want your whole life. I said: I want you to give me light. There are some memories that we all have that are inviolate

to the ravages of time. Inviolate to pain, and suffering. Memories that are so bright, they glow no matter what has happened to us, or what will happen to us. They remain untarnished. Those memories, Jason Todd. Give me those."

Jason thought. And then, by a strange river in an even stranger place, he gave a ghost the memories he had kept close to his heart, the ones that, like Sparrow had said, glowed no matter what darkness crept in.

They were devastating in their simplicity, each and every one, and Jason had a fleeting thought to be ashamed at how unmagnanimous they were, how plain, but he dismissed it. These were his, and his alone.

The moment he'd met Bruce, that first meal together, greasy and hot. The first time Alfred had taught him how to make focaccia. The Christmases with Bruce; the quiet days in the library with Bruce; the pranks with Bruce. His car rides with Dick; the ski trips with Dick; the missions with Dick. The morning Bruce had told him he wanted to adopt him. The first time he'd put on the Robin costume. The day he realized he had a dad, and a grandfather, and an older brother; the day he realized he was happy. There were even a few after the Pit: the day he and Dick had fought until they weren't fighting, they were crying: the day he had gotten his older brother back. The time he'd surprised Damian with a gift that Damian was actually pleased with. And only yesterday: Tim's forgiveness.

A second chance. He'd still give anything for another round at the first one, but as long as he had a second chance—

It was hours, minutes, days before he stopped. He felt lightheaded all of a sudden: drained and battered to his core.

He looked over at Sparrow.

Sparrow considered him for a long time. Finally, he said, "Thank you for the light. I have held up our end of the bargain."

Jason dragged himself to his feet, too tired to ask any follow-up questions, and walked back the way he came.

He was, he thought fuzzily to himself, *really* fucking sick of walking.

Please God please. Don't let Tim be dead.

* * *

Behind him, Sparrow turned to the river.

“Anything,” he mused, aloud to himself. His voice was an echo of thunder. “He would have done anything for his brother.”

He thought about brothers. He thought about light. He thought about the sun, and the waves of an ocean, and families. For the first time in centuries, he did not think about death, or fear.

There was, Sparrow thought to himself, enough light to see by now. He could see his way out, for the very first time. His way home.

The river ran on, until it didn’t. The echo of a man that once was vanished, and did not reappear.

The Labyrinth, which respected any bargain made and held, shifted and turned and stole the poison from Tim Drake’s blood.

Rhea, who had woken, watched. She saw the life return to the boy’s face, saw color where there had been pallor. The fever broke. His sleep became restful. And she wondered at it.

Somewhere in the darkness, she heard Silia scream with rage.

* * *

Jason finally came in sight of the fire, which was burning low, when he heard Tim’s voice.

“He’s—what do you mean he’s *gone?* How long has he been gone?”

Thin, reedy—upset. *Alive.* Jason’s whole body breathed.

“I do not know. I suspect it’s part of the test—”

“Which *direction* did he go—” Tim was trying to untangle himself from his sleeping bag, to get up and go *find Jason,* apparently, which really was a whole new level of dumb.

“Would you stop having a fucking aneurysm and lay back down.” Jason was honest to God so exhausted he thought he was going to die. “Your brain was cooking itself half an hour ago.”

Tim’s head snapped up. His hair was sticking up all over his head, and he looked pale and smudged and *frazzled.* It was such an unfamiliar expression on Tim that Jason had to think, really think, to try remember a time he’d ever seen Tim’s composure break. He hadn’t,

not really.

“Calm down, everybody,” Jason muttered. He walked around the fire and dropped heavily onto his bedroll behind Tim’s. “Stop freaking out, I’m alive.”

Tim twisted to face him, then winced at his own movement.

“Dumbass,” Jason said. “Stop moving.”

“You . . . are you okay?” Tim was fast at work getting himself together, so visibly that Jason could almost see him stitching his calm back on. He couldn’t get it out of his eyes though: there was naked panic there. “You don’t…look okay.”

Jason waved him wearily off. “I ain’t stabbed, if that’s what you mean. Better off than you.” Without thinking, he put the back of his hand against Tim’s temple. “Well. Fever broke, so I think you might actually live. Congratulations, or whatever.”

Tim was doing the studying-him thing again. There really was nothing that got by this fucker. Jason said, “What.”

“I—” Tim hesitated. “Do you need anything?”

Jason pushed out a breath. And suddenly he couldn’t get another one in. It was dark. It was dark. It was dark. He didn’t want it to be dark. He didn’t want it to be dark he wanted out he wanted out he wanted out—

Something horrible crawled back into his mind. Sparrow had said *I want you to give me your memories—*

Tim put both of his hands on Jason’s shoulders and put their heads close together. “Hey,” he said, and there was no trace of his earlier fear. It was all calm, all surety. “I’m going to count. I know it’s annoying. You can tell me I’m dumb later. Just breathe in while I count. One, two, three . . . ”

“Stop,” gasped Jason. “Stop, stop, stop. I’m trying to *remember—”*

He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t go on, not if Sparrow had taken those memories again. It had taken him *years* to get those back, they were the reason he’d come as far as he had, they were who he *was,* he couldn’t *do* this again— he tried to think, to remember, but his mind was tearing itself apart in its panic.

“Jason,” said Tim. “Jason. *Jason.”*

“No,” said Jason. “ *No.”* He was coming unraveled, and this foggy, primeval terror was from back *then,* from after the Pit, and he couldn’t go back there *he couldn’t go back there*—

Tim’s hold tightened like iron. “Jason. Breathe in. One, two—”

It didn’t work, for a while. He would try to sync his breathing with Tim’s voice, and then he couldn’t stop seeing all of it*,* feeling the panic from the last twelve hours sink into him like a knife; the fuckery of this whole situation, *how were they going to get out alive why is it dark why is it always dark what if he couldn’t remember what if he couldn’t* remember

“—two, three, four,” insisted Tim, breaking into Jason’s thoughts.

Jason’s breaths hitched and staggered. He couldn’t get enough oxygen. Tim didn’t stop counting, though, hands tight on Jason’s shoulders. Jason felt like he was going to throw up—he gagged once, coughed, gasped. One of Tim’s hands came up and forced his head down a little. He didn’t break the rhythm of his counting once.

Jason closed his eyes. Could he still—

Yes. The memories were all there. He ran them in his mind, again and again, like a broken record, and they were all there: Dick Dad Alfred Manor Robin. They were all there, it was fine—it was fine.

Slowly, slowly, Jason’s breaths became more even.

After an eternity or two, he croaked, “You can stop counting,” and he sounded as threadbare as he felt.

Tim did. Looked at him with such bone-tired understanding that Jason reached up and ruffled Tim’s hair a little, the way he’d started to with Damian. Jason was too close to passing the fuck out to care that Tim Drake had just witnessed him having a full-on panic attack. Had talked him successfully down from one, which only Dick had ever been able to do. Whatever. It was whatever.

Tim let his hands fall from Jason’s shoulders. For a few minutes, the two of them just sat there in the darkness by a fire burning low. Exhaustion seeped into Jason’s bones.

Finally, Tim said, “What happened?”

Jason shook his head, once. “I don’t know. I don’t know. There was one of those ghost things. He asked . . . for some of my memories.”

Tim stared at him. “Your *memories?”* Horror dawned. “Earlier. You said you were trying to remember—”

Jason interrupted him flatly. “No, I can. Remember. I just.” He dragged a hand over his face, scrubbed it through his hair. “I just. I can’t do that again. I can’t,” he added, mostly to himself.

Tim said, “Okay. But you can remember everything you said?”

Jason nodded. Fucking *hell,* he was tired. He was tired of being here in this hellhole.

Tim said, after a minute, “Where’s Rhea?”

Jason looked. The other side of the fire was empty. It was too dark to see where she’d gone.

“She said she wasn’t going to kill us until morning,” Jason said, shrugging one shoulder.

“You believe her?” Tim’s eyes were closing, head nodding a little.

“Whatever.” Jason flopped over sideways. He pushed Tim a little until Tim fell over beside him. “Don’t wander off.”

Sounding halfway asleep already, Tim muttered, “*You* don’t wander off.”

Jason was asleep an instant later.

They both slept on and off for about four more hours. It was not a restful sleep for either of them. Both of them kept startling up, wild-eyed, and Jason was afraid somewhere in the back of his mind that they were going to hurt each other, that he was going to hurt Tim, but it never happened. Whenever Tim grabbed at Jason while he was asleep, instead of lashing out instantly, Jason just turned toward Tim and hummed, “‘s fine. Nobody’s dead.” Until Tim settled down again. When Jason jerked up from some strange, half-formed nightmare, convinced there was dirt in his mouth, Tim would mumble, fumbling for Jason’s arm, “It’s okay. You’re okay, Jay.” And something about the nickname would soothe him back to sleep for a few fitful more minutes. At one point when he woke, Tim was not next to him, and he sat up, heart leaping into his throat, until he realized Tim was feeding

the fire.

The unseen light source had brightened the room by the time Jason woke up for the final time and gave up on sleep. He rubbed the crust from his eyes, wincing at the taste in his mouth, and sat up. He was sore *everywhere.* He was fucking sick of walking. He was fucking sick of everything.

“Your hair looks like a haystack,” Tim observed from next to him. He was tucked into a neat ball, hands curled in at his neck. He looked wearily aware, like he’d been awake for a while.

“Pot. Kettle,” Jason observed. “We should get going.”

“Yep,” said Tim.

Neither of them moved.

Tim said quietly, staring off at nothing, “This sucks.”

“Yeah,” said Jason. “It does.”

“Can you . . .” Tim hesitated. “Can you still remember?”

Jason felt a spike of panic, but it was soothed by the memories he was able to draw up immediately. *Bruce Dick Alfred Manor Robin*. It was fine.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “Thanks for checking.”

Tim’s relief was plain, but brief. His eyes returned to staring off into nothing.

After another minute, he wondered, “Does this mean Rhea is ahead of us now?” He shifted a little, wincing. “Did our tests line up at the same time because we were at the same place?”

Jason sat back. The idea that Rhea was now ahead of them in the game did little to his morale, as his morale was already in the fucking garbage. “I don’t know why she was here. She didn’t come with me when I went off to talk to the spirit-ghost thing.”

“Silia told us that there wasn’t a set amount of tests,” Tim said, eyebrows drawn together. “Does that mean we have different number of tests, do you think?”

“I think,” said Jason, “that this place does whatever the fuck it wants

and we can't do anything about it."

Tim's eyes closed. His knuckles were white. "There *has* to be some sort of logic behind it. There has to be some sort of pattern."

Jason tried not to be irritated. This was how Tim worked. He was like Bruce: methodical. Answer-oriented.

Jason said, "If this was a machine you'd be right. But it's not. It's a weird, fucked up living thing."

"It can't keep making us go on forever. If this is a race, there has to be an end."

"God, I hope so," said Jason, staring off over the sandstone. Maybe it really would keep just making them walk forever.

Tim said, voice raw, "Do you think. Do you think we're ever going to get home?"

This pierced Jason's core. He lied, "Yeah. Come on, replacement Robin."

Tim corrected wearily, "I'm not Robin." He was still staring off into nothing, eyes blank and frighteningly listless.

Jason shoved at him, trying to reel him back. "Once a Robin, always a Robin."

Tim glanced up at him. Something in his expression thawed.

Jason snapped gruffly, "Or some shit like that. Come *on."*

They packed up camp. After Jason changed, brushed his teeth and had a snack, he even started feeling more like a human person.

They shouldered their packs. Before they got going, though, Jason pointed at Tim in the face, who blinked at him bemusedly and raised one eyebrow.

"If I'd known," Jason said to him accusingly, "that you were some sort of crazy self-sacrificing little bitch, I would have watched you closer. No, shut up, you deserve that, I carried you up a fucking mountain," Jason insisted, when Tim opened his mouth to protest. "If you're tired, we stop. If you need a break, we stop. I'm *serious,* Tim," Jason said, when Tim started to dismiss him.

“I can *walk*. I’m not a child,” Tim snapped, bristling like a porcupine.

Jason snorted. “Whatever, Damian.”

“I am not being like—whatever,” Tim said, glowering when he realized he *did* sound like Damian when Damian was being particularly huffy. “The point is, I’m fine.”

Different angle, different angle. What would Dick say? “Tim. If we’re both gonna get home, this is a play it safe type of deal. If you collapse again while a fucking *monster* is chasing us and then you *die*, I’m *never going to forgive you.”* Okay, less like Dick in the end, but sue him, when he’d fallen off that ledge and realized Tim was injured and alone above him with a giant spider-thing that was for sure about to eat him, he’d thought he was going to vomit up his own heart, he was so afraid.

Tim glared at him mulishly. “Fine.”

Having little brothers was *annoying as hell.*

Jason rolled his eyes and took Tim’s shoulders, shoving Tim in front of him so he could set the pace. Tim smacked his hands away, and Jason smacked him back until both of them shoved each other far enough away that they couldn’t hit each other anymore.

On they walked. Jason was getting sick and tired of this fucked up routine, but after yesterday, he’d take it.

“If we have to walk back *down* this mountain,” Tim muttered threateningly from ahead of him.

Jason said pointedly, “You’ll what?”

After about an hour, however, they came to the side of the cavern. There wasn’t a door. It was just another tunnel.

“Well, nobody’s walking down anything,” Tim said.

“And I,” said Jason, “didn’t even get to piss off the edge.”

The tunnel stayed sandstone for a while until it neatly transubstantiated to rough gray rock. This tunnel was particularly cavelike, taking them winding through uneven twists and turns. Their flashlights had to come out more than once.

Jason kept track of Tim’s pace, watching his back closely, but Tim’s

steps remained steady and even as they walked, if a little slower than he usually would have gone. Tim must have sensed Jason's scrutiny, because he started talking, and he and Jason kept up a constant flow of conversation about everything and nothing as they walked.

"Is it just me," Tim said suddenly, swerving away from their conversation about Metropolis sports teams, "or is this place less . . . creepy than it usually is?"

"Goddammit, man," Jason complained. "Don't fucking *say* that. When are you gonna learn to stop *saying* things in here?"

Tim grumbled at him. They left off on that topic, but as they walked, Jason watched for the creepy crawlies, listened for the usual ghostly wails, the upset, faint screams they'd been hearing the entire time.

None of it was there. Just the sound of them clamoring over rocks, which were normal rock-colored and not riddled with malignant neglect. They might have been in a natural cave.

She is afraid of what is happening to this place, because of you, Sparrow had said.

For the first time Jason wondered what that really meant.

An hour later, a light opened up abruptly ahead. Both of them stopped at the same time when they noticed it.

"What do you think *that* is?" Tim asked.

"I'm eating lunch first before some crazy dinosaur thing comes to eat my liver, or whatever." Jason dropped his pack. "I want my last meal before I go."

"Drama queen," Tim said.

They ate. Tim sat back, hand absently pressing at his side, until he caught Jason glaring at him.

"You are worse than Damian," Tim complained. "It just hurts, nothing more or less. Give me fifteen and we're good to go."

"And you are worse than B," muttered Jason to himself. "Twenty."

Tim rolled his eyes. "Fine."

Chapter 9

After twenty minutes exactly ("*Christ,* Tim." "What?!") they hauled themselves back up and headed for the square of brilliant, piercing light.

The terrain sloped upwards. Rough gray rocks buckled upwards, the crags between them deep and treacherous, forcing them to leap lightly from one rock to the next. It would be just his luck, Jason thought, to slip down and twist a goddamn ankle down here.

The square got bigger. The light got brighter.

Tim said from up ahead, perched neatly on a rock, "I mean. It looks kind of like . . . I know it's not," he added, defensive even though Jason hadn't said a damn thing, "But it sort of looks like . . ."

"The sun," Jason finished. "It looks like sunlight."

They both paused. They were at the precise distance where it just looked like a doorway of light and nothing more. No details were visible yet, but the light spilled down to them, tapping the tops of the rocks and coating the walls.

It couldn't be real. It couldn't. It was just another piece of bait, a honey trap to stick them with.

"So," said Jason, feeling the gray tiredness from the morning seeping back into his bones, "what fucked up thing do we think is through there?"

Tim blew out a breath through his mouth, turning to look at Jason. Something flickered in his eyes: that piercing, see-through-anything look. His expression shifted, and he said abruptly, voice nearly flippant, "I think our family's cursed. This crap never happens to anybody *else.* You'll never catch a *Kent* stuck in some sort of mirror-organ thing."

Jason snorted. "You might catch an Arrow in here, though."

"This does seem like it might happen to Ollie. Not to Wonder Woman, though."

"That's because Wonder Woman is better than the rest of us."

Tim swiveled. “Wonder Woman, huh?”

“Mind your fucking business. Yes, Wonder Woman.”

“Ha *ha.* Does B know Wonder Woman is your favorite Justice League member?”

“He was real butthurt when I requested a Wonder Woman sweatshirt one year for my birthday. Honest to God sulked. Jesus.”

Tim snickered. “I don’t even—oh.”

He stopped, perched on a tall rock in front of Jason. He was neatly obscuring the doorway, outlined in sunlight.

“What,” said Jason.

Tim didn’t say anything.

“*Drake,”* Jason prompted, afraid and annoyed, and Tim jumped a little.

“I just—” Tim looked back at him, looking a little lost. It was a surprising expression on him. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know *what.”* Jason climbed up on the rock next to him.

His breath snagged in his throat.

The doorway opened up to the sky. It was not the cheap, faded world the Labyrinth had been taunting them with; not the overly honeyed, fantastical outside of Rhea and her daughter. It was just the outside.

Mountains reared all around them, dusted with spring’s fading snow, heaving all the way to the horizon off to the left. Jason stared down into the plunging valley down below, a lake shimmering blue as a forget-me-not, narrowing until it trailed away in a gently shimmering ribbon. Waves of pine trees coated the mountain sides. Above, the sun shimmered, fat white clouds drifting over the sky. Far in the distance, down in the valley, Jason could see where the forest flattened, turned the terracotta of a huge, sweeping plain studded with beads of sagebrush green.

All at once, he knew where they were. His wonder popped like a balloon.

“Colorado,” he murmured. He fell back a step. “That’s Colorado.”

Tim wasn't so easily swayed by temptation, either, no matter how realistic it looked. His face was riddled with doubt. "But…not really. Right. I mean, there's no signs of civilization anywhere." Then he turned to look strangely at Jason. "How do you know that's Colorado?"

"It was…one of the memories that I told…it's from my past. It's doing that fucking thing where it takes part of your past and makes it real." Jason felt, for some reason, deeply betrayed. He wasn't sure why. That was what this place *did.* He *knew* that.

But God. It looked so real. And he wanted so desperately to be out.

Tim's jaw flexed. "Jesus," he muttered darkly, "Christ." But Jason saw a mirror of his own furious longing reflected in Tim's eyes. They *both* wanted so desperately to be out.

"So," Tim said, after a long moment, "what do we do?"

"Why are you asking me?" Jason snipped.

Tim looked at him. "It's your memory."

Jason looked around. Weighed his options.

"Well," he said, hopping to another rock, closer to the light, "in for a penny, in for a pound. Come on. Let's go get some fucking sunlight."

"Wh—be *careful."* Tim scrambled a little after him. "Something's going to bite your head off—"

"You seem very concerned about all of my extremities being chomped off. *You're* the one who got stabbed. And besides—"

And then he was outside.

He forgot what he was saying. The sun stabbed at his eyes, poured over his face, and it was so warm he could have died. His whole body released, a clenched fist relaxing.

It smelled like outside, too: fresh and earthy, pine trees and damp soil and the scent of cold mountain rivers. He could hear the water rushing somewhere close by. The wind blew through the trees, and overhead, the clouds drifted in that blue, blue sky, lazy and content.

Tim heaved a contented sigh next to him. When Jason glanced over at him, he found Tim with his arms crossed over his chest, head tilted

towards the sun, eyes half-lidded.

“This is a nice memory,” Tim told him.

“Hmm,” Jason said.

“*Hmmm,”* Tim mocked him, reminding him of who he sounded like.

They both stood like that for a few long, blissful minutes. It wasn’t like they weren’t listening for sounds of danger—they were—or looking around to make sure their location was secure—they were—but it was nice, not being in a fucking tunnel.

Jason tipped his head up. The wind ruffled at his hair.

“Maybe this is like Marion’s waterfalls,” Tim suggested. “Nothing attacked us in there.”

"You forget about nearly drowning?"

"I meant no *monsters."*

Jason opened his eyes. “You think we’ll see home again?”

Jason wasn’t sure he wanted that, actually. He didn’t want to hear them talking about him again. Thinking about it made the old wound flare, red and stinging.

Tim shrugged. “Dunno. This is . . . a really good imitation.” He stared out at the wide horizon, the sweep of the sky, the rearing mountains. “But there’s no animals or anything. Shouldn’t there be noise besides the water?”

“Probably.” Jason wanted it to be real so badly. “There’s always fucking something. I hear water, though. Which means . . .”

“Yeah,” Tim agreed. “A swim sounds great right about now. But I’m not getting in—”

“Rivers are shallow,” Jason said. “Come on.”

“There could be man-eating slugs in them,” said Tim, following him. “Or snakes. And don’t piranhas live in rivers?”

“Piranhas don’t live in Colorado, you fucking moron.”

“Maybe in the freaky Labyrinth Colorado they do! Giant sea monsters

don't usually live in *lakes,* either—"

"I'll get in first if you're too pussy to."

"That is not what I said."

"I'll let you know if I get eaten. It'll sound like this: *AAAAGHH!* " Jason ran at Tim, who held his ground and shoved him away, rolling his eyes.

"Oh, my God, shut up."

The river was wide and clear, steady and slow, the deepest parts only coming up to Jason's waist. And cold. Spring-time, snow-melted cold, rushing over a riverbed of smooth brown rocks.

But Jason didn't let on to that. He waded in barefoot, bare-chested, muscled down his yelp, and said, "No piranhas. Yet." Goosebumps broke out all over his skin, but hopefully Tim was too far away for that.

Tim glared at the water suspiciously, but the water ran clear enough that even he could see there was nothing in it. "Whatever," he said, stripping off his shirt, revealing his bandage. He stepped over to a large, flat rock and hunched down to jump in: "All I'm saying is if I get—" He jumped in, waist-high instantly. His high-pitched yelp and ensuing flail had Jason doubled over in laughter, and Tim's furious, mulish expression only made it worse.

"You," Tim said, every muscle in his body tensed from the cold, "bastard."

"What's wrong, baby rich boy?" Jason could feel how shit-eating his grin was. "Can't handle a little cold?"

"All right. That's it."

"What's—no! You *shithead—"*

Tim dove for him, quick and swift as a hawk. They grappled with each other, Tim trying to climb onto Jason's back; Jason tossed him lightly away each time, gentling his hits just enough that Tim never went down all the way. The last he needed was river water infecting that wound again. That seemed like something that would happen to Tim.

They went to shore, wrestled there like kids, both of them too light

and quick to ever get a real hit in. It turned into something like sparring, daring and edged with their real skills, but never their real force. Sometime in the last week and a half, they had lost their appetite for hurting each other. It was rowdy and teasing, real. Here in the sun it was just two boys outside roughhousing, and the horror receded like pale smoke.

It ended when Tim slipped down and in with a well-placed kick while Jason was moving, and Jason toppled fully into the water, the slippery rocks unseating his footing. He sat up, spluttering, the cold seizing his lungs a little, and let out a long string of black swear words at Tim. Tim just sat by the river and laughed at him, cheerfully flipping him off.

Jason waded in further and dunked himself a few more times, swimming a little. It was a poor excuse for a shower, but the bite of the cold moving water helped wash off the sweat and fear from the night before. He looked over at Tim, making sure Tim wasn't about to get his wound dirty ("Harmful microorganisms, Jaylad," said Bruce's voice in his head from that hot Colorado past, when Jason had asked about why they couldn't drink river water). Tim dunked his head in the water, scrubbed his hands over his hair, his face, splashed water over his chest, but he was careful to avoid the bandages. Well, at least he wasn't *that* dumb.

Jason waded out and found a slanted rock in a patch of grass to lean against, lazing in the sun with his eyes closed, the light blazing orange through his eyelids. He knew this wasn't going to last, and they really needed to get going, but he wanted to make it stretch for as long as he could.

When he reached for the Colorado memory, he found it instantly, curling around it, tasting his own awed delight again like citrus. *Why are we going to Colorado, B? Just thought you might like it. Have you ever been camping? I've slept outside before, B. Yes, well, this is camping. A tent. We'll go fishing. With like, marshmallows and campfires, and stuff? Yes. Cool!*

Jason opened his eyes, contemplating the pointed swells of the pine forest. Usually the Labyrinth brought trauma. He wondered what had shifted to change it to *I brought you some sunlight from when you were fifteen.*

After what was an hour, or maybe only half of one, Tim settled down in the grass near Jason and crossed one foot over the other. Jason sat

up, taking a drink of water. They would need food again soon—God, he hated rationing food—but it was difficult to be concerned about it just then, with the sun twinkling on the rush of the river.

They sat there in companionable silence, Jason sitting against his rock watching the water and Tim on the grass, until Tim's hands went slack, head sliding to the side, breathing deepening.

Tim had to have been way more tired than he was letting on, if he'd gone to sleep that fast. Dumb fucker. Jason should have made them stop more. Being that sick was no joke, and they'd had to get up and go only hours after Tim had been at death's door.

After a quarter of an hour, it was clear that Tim wasn't waking up anytime soon. Jason snuck away, letting him sleep, and scouted out their surroundings. He returned every ten minutes or so to make sure nothing was trying to eat Tim, but so far, nothing was exceptionally out of the ordinary except for the lack of wildlife. If there had been a puzzle, the Labyrinth would have presented it to them by now. It made Jason prickle with unease, his earlier calm leaking away. There had to be a price for this.

Fifty feet to Tim's right, Jason found an unmistakable trail leading off into the mountains, winding off into the distance.

"More walking," he muttered to himself. "Figures."

At least it was out here and not in those motherfucking tunnels.

A sound. "Jay?" Tim, sharp and loud.

Jason yelled, "I'm here, keep your hair on." But he went immediately back, darting through the pine trees, boots crunching over a carpet of browned needles.

Tim twisted around at his approach, rubbing sleep from his eyes. He yawned, his jaw cracking loud enough for Jason to hear. "Oh, hey. Crap. What time is it?"

Jason twisted his watch around. "Two. It's fine."

"*Two?* You let me sleep for an hour!"

Jason rolled his eyes. "We'll live. You can take naps. You were dying twelve hours ago."

“Not if Rhea wins.” Tim scowled, but it wasn’t directed at Jason.

“Found a trail,” Jason said, nodding in its direction. “It goes off into the mountains. So now we have a direction, anyway. And it doesn’t even go to the lake.”

“It’s the little things.” Tim stretched, then shouldered his pack.

Then they did what they’d been doing for the last nine fucking days straight: they walked.

The cool pine forest gave way to the warmth of the late afternoon, the trees becoming sparse enough to let the sunlight blaze down on them. The trail took them into the mountains, carrying them perpendicular to the lakes and the valley. The shade was cool enough that Jason began to consider what they were going to do to stay warm when night fell.

They broke for another meal two hours later, perched on rocks.

“Hey,” Jason said.

“Hm.” Tim glanced over at him, his mouth full of sandwich.

“First of all. Does that abomination of a sandwich have both *jam* and *pickles* on it?”

Tim shook the offending sandwich at him. “Yes. And?” he demanded, mouth still full.

“You,” Jason informed him, “are fucking disgusting.”

“*You have peanut butter and lettuce on the same sandwich.”*

“Like mayo, peanut butter is just a lubricant.”

“In very specific circumstances. And peanut butter is nothing like mayo.”

“This is one of those specific circumstances.”

Tim wrinkled his nose disdainfully. He declared, “Blech.”

Jason rolled his eyes, taking a big bite of his sandwich.

“Anyway,” Tim said, swallowing. “What were you going to say?”

Jason chewed thoughtfully. After a moment, he said, “How’d you become Robin?”

Whatever Tim had been expecting, this was not it: he became very still, glancing at Jason and rabbiting away. Guardedly, he said, “Why? It’s not interesting.”

Jason leaned back against a rock, the stone rough and warm against his back. “I just wanna hear it from you.”

Tim eyed him narrowly. Jason let him look, feeling something that might have been labeled fond patience.

Tim hedged, “I made him do it,” still looking, always analyzing.

Jason said, “A twelve-year-old made the great Batman let him follow him around.”

“Thirteen,” said Tim, a touch defensively. “And . . . yeah. I mean. I figured out their identities—”

“Which you did *how,* exactly—?” Jason interrupted.

Tim gave him a look. “Jay, who else do you know that can do a triple somersault and likes to use that kind of velocity to dislocate criminals’ shoulders?”

“A thirteen year old put that together.”

Tim prickled. “I was nine when I did that.”

“ *You*— ugh.” Jason scrubbed his hand through his hair. “Start from the beginning.”

“I’m trying!”

“O *kay.”* Jason flapped a hand. “I’m done interrupting.”

Tim glared.

Jason lifted a hand. “Scout’s honor.”

“Yeah, *right,”* muttered Tim, side-eyeing him. “But we should get going.”

“Yeah, okay. But you’re still telling me.”

They packed. They headed west, out into the beautiful, showy world that wasn't theirs. Tim told it.

—

"You had too much time on your hands."

"You *said—"*

" I'm being quiet, Jesus."

—

" You're telling me—"

"Ja *son—"*

"Quit it, don't hit me! You're telling me that you had solved a fucking mystery that *Batman himself* couldn't figure out, and you were *leading him to the killer like Hansel and fucking Gretel—"*

". . . well, when you put it *like that* . . ."

—

Tim went quickly over the parts where Bruce had come unraveled after Jason's death. Jason heard it anyway. He'd heard it before, but for some reason, with that Colorado memory sitting heavy on his tongue and Bruce's warm laughter from those days echoing just out of reach— the way that Tim had been there, had *seen it*— for some reason, this time around, it made him want to goddamn cry.

"Batman," Tim said, "needed a Robin."

—

"Anyway. After the Clayface thing Bruce sort of. Agreed to train me." Tim lifted a shoulder and lowered it again, looking out over the mountain range. The sun was setting, splashing the world in violent oranges and midnight blues. They had broken out their jackets half an hour before. "The whole . . . adopting thing happened a lot later."

It was a lame ending to a genuinely extraordinary tale, but it snicked

something into place for Jason.

Batman needed a Robin, Tim had insisted.

The picture formed in Jason's head as he looked out over a false Colorado. Without Jason's bitterness, without his hatred for Tim, with all the pieces he'd gathered about Tim's parents, a childhood, Jason was beginning to suspect, spent forgotten—with the longing for Bruce fresh on his mind from the night before—the picture was easy, put together in an instant.

Bruce, damaged and broken and hurting and lost. Tim, damaged and broken and hurting and lost. Bruce, who had never once been able to look the other way, who would not have been able to look the other way then despite his pain. A boy, smart and spitting and determined, with no one to love him.

Jason glanced at Tim, saw Bruce in his mind's eye.

Bruce and Tim had never stood a chance. It made Jason want to laugh, strangely. Jason wondered what Tim would say if Jason told him that Bruce would have adopted him either way, Robin or no Robin. Because that's exactly what would have happened.

Damn predictable, gruff, loving, philanthropic billionaire.

The sun began to fade.

"We should camp," Tim said, as twilight began spreading purple over the world. "We're for sure gonna need a fire, and it's gonna suck being out here unless we have some sort of shelter."

They built a quick camp, clumsy and inelegant, but it would work for however long the Labyrinth wanted to keep them there. They stocked up on firewood, dug a pit for the fire, and built it up high. They shoved pine branches against the side of the mountain and put their bedrolls side by side.

The stars began to sweep out in great, glittering swaths. Another reminder that they were not on their Earth: these stars shimmered in vast blankets, none of their constellations in sight. Jason sat cross-legged by the fire, massaging one of his feet. Walking for days straight fucking *hurt.*

"Be hard to navigate under this sky," Tim remarked. He dropped down onto his bedroll beside Jason, a groan punching out of him as he

landed.

“Stop side-eyeing me,” Tim muttered, shifting as he got comfortable. “It’s fine. It’s not anything worse than I’ve gotten as Robin.”

“That’s usually my line,” Jason said, quirking an eyebrow. “You know. Not much worse than being blown up.”

“Ha ha,” said Tim flatly, unimpressed as Dick when Jason made those jokes. “Hilarious.”

“I am, thank you.”

The fire crackled. Jason stared out over the imitation Colorado, the other sky.

He was gonna be pissed if something tried to kill him in the middle of the night.

“Why did you want to know?” Tim asked suddenly, lying flat on his back, staring up at the stars. “About Robin.”

Jason blinked back to the present. “What—oh.”

He had to think about it. Usually he would have tossed out a quick, snappy throwaway remark, but he was beginning to realize those didn’t work with Tim. He was like a dog with a bone when he wanted a real answer. The trick was not revealing too much. There had to be a way to tell Tim about the pain without telling him about the pain.

Perceptive little bastard.

Tim said, “He wanted it to be you. Bruce. Sometimes he’d turn around and I knew he was half-expecting it to be you.”

Jason had waited too long, and now Tim was telling him about his own pain without telling him about his own pain. Trying to be objective, Jason said, quick and cross, “You don’t know that.”

Tim gave him a look. It was a look that was often on Tim’s face, the look that said, slightly arrogantly, *Actually I know everything.* “Sometimes when he wasn’t thinking about it he’d make me bagels with cream cheese and almonds.”

“Who doesn’t like cream cheese with bagels?” Jason demanded, trying desperately to smother whatever had begun to squeeze his lungs.

Tim stared at him for a long time. “I’m allergic to almonds,” he said.

Jason pulled himself together, with difficulty. “Look,” Jason said, staring down at his clenched hands. His knuckles were white. “Look. I don’t want you to think . . . listen. This isn’t going to make me feel better. And if you’re trying to insinuate that Bruce wants me over you, I’m going to tell you right now that you’re wrong. You’re his kid, too, and he doesn’t go in for trading those.”

Tim struggled a little, sat up. “I’m not telling you to make you feel better,” he said.

“Oh, yeah? And what the fuck is it for?” *Why* did the fact that Bruce had absentmindedly made Jason’s favorite snack for years after he’d gone make him so *fucking mad*—

“Because when I tried to tell that to anyone else they’d get upset,” Tim told him. “Or, if they were Dick, tried to pretend like I was dumb. Like it was just some accident.”

“God forbid anybody try to tell you you’re dumb,” muttered Jason.

“It isn’t dumb to think that B wanted his son back,” Tim snapped.

“Well, here I am,” Jason snapped right back.

“Here you are,” Tim agreed. “Missing the point, par for the course.”

“If this is some weird thing, trying to make it seem like Bruce wants me instead of you, I *promise* you are fucking wrong.” Jason looked Tim dead in his eyes. “I know you are, okay? So if that’s what this is —”

“It’s not that,” Tim said. “I know . . . I get that Bruce cares about me,” he said, and even that was said a little grudgingly, “and I know he wouldn’t . . . trade us, or whatever. It’s just that you never saw the hole, because you were the one who left it.”

“And now I can’t fill it, yeah, yeah, yeah,” said Jason, simmering with that familiar low, coal-burning rage.

“Well, first *I* couldn’t fill it,” said Tim.

Jason groaned. “Tim, I don’t fucking understand—”

“Neither do I,” interrupted Tim. “But I’m. I don’t know. Trying to.” He curled his arms around his legs.

Jason threw up his hands. “You’re trying to understand *now?”*

Tim said, “We weren’t friends before now.”

He flashed a quick, shamed glance at Jason, as though Jason was going to deny it. After carrying him up a fucking mountain and walking about a million miles with him.

Jason said, “You’re so weird. You’re Robin because you’re like mold: once you’ve latched onto something, you won’t fucking let it go.” He cuffed Tim gently on the back of his head without looking at him, just in case Tim thought he was serious.

“I can’t help you understand anything, really,” Jason told him, after a long pause. “I don’t fucking understand anything, either. Not B, not what . . . our relationship is now, not anything.”

“Well, I think you’re at an impasse ‘cause you’re fucking stubborn,” Tim told him.

Don’t fight with Tim, don’t do it don’t do it “Yeah, and it’s not at all because of all the shit that’s happened since I came back, or that I’ve fucked everything up, and definitely not because Bruce would probably rather I stayed dead than come back like this, for sure not because B didn’t even *do anything* about the guy that *murdered me in the first place,* not because I know I can’t walk back into that house without thinking about everything—I can’t even go home, that fifteen-year-old *ghost* lives there instead, and *that fucking clown—”*

He came back to himself. He was standing without remembering how he’d gotten there, chest heaving.

Taking a huge breath, he turned back to Tim. Tim was looking at him with an inscrutable, unflappable expression, eyes intent, and it doused some of the flames; Tim wasn’t looking at him like he wanted him to be somebody else. Tim was just looking at him like he wanted to understand.

“What?” Jason said shortly, when the silence stretched.

Tim shrugged. “I’m not gonna say anything.”

“You’re thinking something.”

“No I’m not.”

“Yes you are. I can hear it.”

“You’re just hearing the Super Mario theme song that’s stuck in my head at all times,” Tim told him.

This thawed something; Jason huffed a reluctant laugh and came back to sit by Tim again.

“No really,” Jason said.

“No really,” Tim returned. “You don’t wanna hear it, and it’s not productive to say it.”

“Tim,” said Jason crossly.

“Ba da da dada da, da,” Tim sang.

“You’re so fucking obnoxious.”

“Just maybe think about the fact that Bruce doesn’t know what to say either and you’re not the only one who messed up,” Tim said, very quickly. “Okay, that’s really it. That’s all.”

“You lasted four seconds.”

“I didn’t say everything I was thinking.”

“Whatever.”

They lapsed back into silence. Tim laid back down, made himself comfortable again.

After a quarter of an hour at least had passed, Tim glanced over at Jason again. “What was it like? The . . . before you were back.”

“What was what like. Being dead? ‘Cause if you’re wondering if I remember who was in charge over there, you’re in for some disappointment. Talk to God yourself, if you’re so interested.”

“Not being dead,” Tim said. “Coming back.”

Dr. Thompkins had tried to get Jason to talk about this. Dick. Roy. Even Bruce. Every time he tried it felt like opening a tunnel in his memory, and it unearthed something awful and screaming and writhing, a part of him had never been quieted.

Tim wasn’t trying to fix him. Tim had never known Jason before;

there wasn't any pain in him to unearth to match Jason's. Perhaps that was why, under the false stars of a Colorado from five years ago, Jason told Tim.

"Imagine that it's a Thursday," he said, staring up at the sky. "Just a normal, regular Thursday. And you're going to school in the morning. And you've just had your nighttime cup of tea that somebody who loves you has made just the way you like. And you're in the house that you love best, with the people you love best. And they haven't been getting along but lately, it seems like they might someday. Like that someday might be coming sooner than anybody in the house thinks. And you think . . . for the first time in your whole life . . . that things . . . might work out for you. That maybe everything's gonna be okay."

The writhing, screaming thing was behind his eyes, and then it was coming out of his mouth, raw and awful and childlike in its misunderstood agony.

"And then you wake up and . . . the whole world has collapsed on top of you. Literally. And it's so cold, and you're in your best suit, and I was in so much pain, and I thought I'd died and that was what hell was and the dirt . . . just kept coming down on me. It wouldn't stop. Even after I'd gotten out of the coffin . . . it ripped my hands apart, getting that thing open. Damaged my shoulders. And it was in my ears, in my mouth. And I just . . . I kept yelling for someone to help me."

What he'd really done was scream for Bruce. Scream for *dad*.

Dad! DAD! HELP ME! HELP ME!

At the time, he hadn't even known who *Dad* was. He hadn't known who *he* was. But it had come out of his mouth anyway, from some forgotten part that still knew Bruce, that still trusted him implicitly.

"Anyway. I got out," he finished, dully. "And then I wandered around until I collapsed and somebody took me to a hospital. But nobody knew who I was, and I was still halfway dead. And then later the Al Ghuls found me, and dumped me in some green sludge, and now I got this sick white streak in my hair. The end."

He wasn't thinking about the mess with the League of Assassins, though. He was thinking about *before.* He was thinking about knowing he was loved.

"The Pit madness," Tim said.

“I don’t want to talk about that,” said Jason immediately. There was only so much trauma reliving one guy could do in one night.

“No, not that. The thing that . . . after it was all over. What made you come back after that?”

Jason glanced over at Tim. “Dick,” he said simply.

Tim nodded. Dick could always see people; Dick had seen Jason—Dick had seen him in there, the way that nobody else could, not even Bruce. And Dick had done what Dick Grayson had always done with his younger brother: yelled at him, knocked him around a little, and dragged him home.

The fire snapped a little, sent a shower of sparks into the sky. Tim said, “I miss them.”

Jason said, “Me too.”

He had been missing his family for longer than he had known them.

“Thanks,” Tim said. “For telling me.”

Jason nodded. “Hey,” he said.

“Yeah.”

“We should . . . I don’t know.” Jason threw him a small, lopsided smile. “If we don’t want to kill each other after all this, when we get out, we should hang out.”

Tim considered him. “When we get out,” he said, “I’m bringing you home.”

They both sat awake for longer than they should have, longer than their exhaustion and sore feet should have let them. Tim went first to sleep, late into the night. Jason listened to his deep, even breathing for a long time. Eventually, very late, or very early, he slept.

* * *

Tim woke up more sore than he had been the day before, if that was possible. His stab wound pounded a dull ache through his side, and his feet throbbed, swollen. Dull gray light filtered in, and their ashy fire glowed with dying embers, white flakes drifting through the air. He sighed, giving himself a few more minutes to lay there and feel sorry for himself before he moved.

He groaned as he sat up, forcing one deep breath through his teeth.

Jason was sleeping with his back to Tim. He said, voice annoyed and half-asleep, “Are you dying?”

“No,” Tim grunted, crawling out of their half-tent and brushing pine needles out of his hair. “I . . .”

Tim trailed off.

He said, “Hell.”

Something about Tim’s tone had Jason crawling out after him.

“Well,” said Jason, blinking sleep out of his eyes. “At least it had the decency to give us some warmth first. God.” He yawned, his jaw cracking.

“I’m packing firewood in my pack,” Tim said, staring off into the distance. “Do you think it’s going to freeze us to death?”

“I’m not making any sort of predictions,” muttered Jason darkly. “I’m going to pee. *Fucking* hell.”

Up ahead about five miles off, there was a canyon where there hadn’t been one before. There wasn’t any other way but that way, now, and inside the canyon, great flurries of snow fell on cliffs already burdened with what had to be at least a foot and a half of snow. Purple-black clouds darkened the entire southern sky, and lightning flickered darkly within.

It was already colder. Tim zipped his jacket up, feeling the fabric that was meant to keep off a brisk chill, not a full-on winter storm. The false Colorado had lost its glowing, buttery warmth, the saturation leaking from the world. Their brief gift of the sun was gone; the Labyrinth was back to do whatever it was going to do to them next.

Tim did not want to walk anymore; he wanted to curl up and huddle down until the world disappeared around him. But he packed up, ate some breakfast, dry-swallowed some mild painkillers, and then they started walking again.

He was going to have some wicked blisters later. If he made it to later.

It took them just under an hour and a half to make it to the canyon.

They both stood there, eyeing the perfect line that was between them

and a whole lot of snow. The wind that was blowing out of the canyon was the type of cold that made the inside of Tim's nose hurt.

"This," Jason said, "is some fucking bullshit."

Tim dropped his backpack.

Jason looked from him to the backpack. "Bitch, you better be joking."

Tim gave him a withering glance and began rooting through his pack. "Don't be dumb. I'm putting on more layers. These jackets aren't even sort of going to cut it."

"Thank God." Jason put down his own backpack. "I thought this place had actually driven you insane for a second."

Tim pulled out a pair of his own thick black gloves, the only sort of winter gear the Labyrinth had given him. "We should've known this was coming from these," he said gloomily.

They put on most of the clothes in their packs, turning themselves into oddly bulky caricatures. Tim was bracing his whole body, ready to step inside the storm, when Jason walked over to him and latched something through his belt loops.

Tim pinwheeled a little. "Are you *leashing* me?"

"Yes," said Jason calmly, tugging at the length of safety cable he'd apparently procured from his pack. So their packs *did* have different things in them. He had a shirt around his head, which looked stupid but was probably genuinely a good idea. "Are you kidding me, visibility's gonna be shit in there. Do you want to get separated again?"

"No," said Tim, grudgingly impressed at this level of forethought, bothered that he hadn't thought of it first.

"That's what I thought." Jason glared at the offending snow. The wind whistled through the canyon, unimpressed at Jason's cool fury. "I hate being cold."

"Three tugs if you see something alarming," said Tim.

"I see something alarming. It's everything in there."

"Three tugs if you're getting eaten by something."

“Yeah, okay. I’ll be sure to remember that while I’m getting eaten.”

Tim rolled his eyes, pulling a shirt around his head like Jason’s.

They stepped inside.

Just because Tim had braced himself for it didn’t mean that he was prepared for it.

The wind was vicious, stealing the breath from Tim’s lungs, and the temperature dropped by twenty-five degrees between one step and the next, easy. Every scrap of exposed skin stung from the cold, and Tim spared a second to be earnestly grateful for his gloves. His hands would probably have frozen off otherwise.

Jason glanced over at him, and Tim glanced back. Jason’s look said, *This sucks,* and Tim’s glance also said, *This sucks.*

They began to wade through the snow.

Tim’s pants were waterproof, and his boots were sturdy enough, but neither were thick enough to protect him from the temperature of the snow. Snowflakes clung to his eyelashes. Black cliffs furred with snow loomed up all around them, jagged and imposing, and every so often, a big clump of snow fell from above, landing with a big, muffled thump. Tim tried very, very hard not to think about avalanches.

It took him a while to realize it, focused as he was keeping his footing, but the terrain began to slope slowly upwards. It was taking them up the canyon.

God only knew what was at the top.

They struggled on.

The distance they had covered in ninety minutes that morning now took them twice that. Tim’s feet were starting to lose their feeling inside his shoes. The snowflakes became larger. The wind howled, tearing at the cliffsides.

He was grateful more than once that Jason had had the forethought to tie them together. Visibility did indeed drop as fog and snowy winds coated the canyon, and several times, he felt the line pull taut as he began to unknowingly wander away from Jason.

As they climbed, however, the wind began to lose some of its ferocity.

It took Tim a minute to notice, though, because he was already cold all over, cold down to his bones.

They got higher. The cliffs narrowed, closing in over their heads so there was only a sliver of sky. The falling snow became gentler, smoother.

When the wind had stopped altogether, Jason said, “How’s it going back there?”

“Oh, you know,” said Tim, who was clenching his jaw around his shivers so hard his teeth hurt.

Jason looked back at him and shrugged a little. Snow coated his t-shirt head wrap and shoulders. He squinted up ahead, where the cliffs narrowed down to a small opening the size of a doorway. “That’s convenient.”

“Something like that.” Tim glanced behind, where he could still see the storm raging furiously behind them. At least there was no more wind.

They climbed. The closer they got, the more disconcerted Tim became, a kite cut free. He hated this place. He hated not knowing the specifics, only that it was going to be terrible, and it was coming for them, now.

Somewhere in the back of his head, he thought about the fact that at some point, there had to be a last test. And according to the original myth, the worst monster was at the finish line.

The terror of something worse than they had already faced sent an entirely different sort of shiver down his spine.

Fog snuck through the black doorway. The cliffs had leaned together overhead, creating a strange, craggy ceiling.

Jason went through first. He had to duck his head. Tim followed him.

The doorway opened wide, depositing them at the top of a bowl-shaped valley, full of snow and eerily silent. Black rocks jutted and twisted out of the ground, crags tipped with white all the way down to the valley’s center. The sky was gray, but not in the gray that Tim was used to: it was colorless, dark. The lack of color.

At the very bottom of the valley, in the dead center, was a large

house. Every light was on, its many windows blazing merrily against the colorless world, a circus in the middle of a dead wheat field.

Slowly, Tim reached out and closed a hand around Jason's bicep. He squeezed until he was sure he was hurting Jason, but he had to know that Jason was real, that he was seeing this, because the horror threatened to swallow Tim whole. Jason said nothing at all, but his face was awful in the stark lighting, something like revulsion twisting his mouth.

There was none of the gardens, none of the alarms, none of the usual surroundings, nothing to hint at what its counterpart was in the real world. It didn't matter, though, because Tim and Jason would know that house anywhere.

The light spilled onto the snow, buttery as sunlight, and Wayne Manor stood against the gray world, twinkling invitingly, waiting for them like an open mouth.

Chapter 10

It took them only an hour to descend into the valley. They didn't talk about whether or not they should go. They knew where the Labyrinth was pointing them, and they knew that the Labyrinth always got it what it wanted.

When they got to the front door, it was open. Not enough to show them what was waiting for them, but enough that light spilled out.

Tim gazed up at the duplicate Manor. There was something . . . just a little off about it, as though someone had drawn it with the reference close at hand, but had angled the lines wrong.

It sent a deeply unpleasant shudder down his spine.

"Alfred would never," muttered Jason, staring at the open door like it had personally wronged him. Tim was standing close enough that their shivers were shaking each other. Tim tried very hard not to think about the idea that another Alfred might be in there.

"Don't untie us," said Tim.

"Wasn't planning on it."

In they went.

As creeped out as Tim was, the temperature change was immediately noticeable. It was significantly warmer inside, and as soon as Jason shut the door behind them, the cold began to recede. The wind vanished.

It was exactly the same on the inside as the real Manor: the old wealth put on display in elegant abundance, but once again, something was slightly *off* about it. Something wrong that was nearly unnoticeable, but it kept Tim's hackles up, senses straining for any sort of noise.

This was wrong. This was wrong. Tim wanted to *go home,* and this was it, but it wasn't.

The only sound was the clock, ticking too loudly. *Tick tock tick tock tick tock* . . .

The stairs were empty, the hallways empty. There were no coats on the coat rack, no shoes piled by the door. None of the usual evidence

that the house was full of people. Tim unwrapped his t-shirt from his head, brushing snow off his shoulders. The only parts of his entire body he could feel were his hands.

Jason pulled the shirt off his own head, shaking his head back and forth like a dog. “Well,” he said, rubbing at his red nose, “at least we’re maybe not going to freeze to death.”

Tim just stared around the house, trying to figure out what else was wrong. Why he felt like this was an altered photograph of the house instead of an exact replica. Was it that the walls were darker? The ceilings just a little too tall? The deep shadows in every corner—

Tim made a small, almost inaudible sound.

Jason must have followed Tim’s gaze, because he said, voice as quiet as Tim’s, “Oh my God.”

The thing curled up in the shadows on the ceiling wearing Alfred’s face regarded them calmly. “Be sure to brush off all the snow before you come any further,” it said with Alfred’s voice, a slight scold in his serene tone. “I don’t want puddles later.”

Jason slowly reached out and closed his hand around Tim’s forearm, pulling him to the side, away from the door and away from the creature. Neither of them took their eyes off it.

It uncoiled itself a little, multitudes of legs tapping against the glossy wood of the walls as it shifted. “Food in the kitchen, young masters. Kettle’s on. It’s awfully cold out there. We wouldn’t want anyone to catch a chill.” It lifted one eyebrow in the amused, indulgent expression Alfred got whenever the boys were being particularly stupid. “You know where the chamomile is, Master Tim?”

“Um,” Tim said. He and Jason edged along the wall. “Sure thing.”

Alfred’s face clucked at them. “Be sure to mind the mirrors.”

The creature shifted again, curled, and the face disappeared from view, back into the shadows.

Jason and Tim kept their eyes on the shadowed corner, where they could still make out the monstrous shape of the thing with Alfred’s face, and slipped out of the main entry and down the hall where the kitchen was. They kept their backs to the wall the entire time.

As soon as they were in the kitchen, Tim grabbed the door and slammed it, then whirled on the room, chest heaving.

It was just the kitchen, brightly lit enough to reveal that nothing was lurking in the shadows, with a human face or otherwise. The hum of the kitchen appliances sounded deafening to Tim's heightened senses.

The shrill, demanding whistle of the kettle made Jason and Tim slam their backs against the door, Jason's gun halfway out of his pocket and Tim's knife in his hand.

After a long moment, both of them trying to slow their breathing, Jason said, "Tea?"

Tim threw him a hectic look. "*Tea?"*

Jason shrugged. He yanked off his gloves and flexed his hands open and closed, the only indication that he was still unsettled. "Don't know about you, but I don't have any food left. If there's anything edible in here I am going to eat it. And I'm still fucking cold."

"Right," said Tim. He was calm, he was cool, he was collected. He was not going to lose his shit. He was fine. It was fine.

Jason went for the fridge, Tim went for the pantry. Tim kept his knife in his hand and opened the pantry like something was going to come out and eat him instead of the other way around—which seemed likely in here.

There was nothing in there except the food. Tim stared at it, an ache burning low in his belly. There was nothing off about this—it was all arranged in the way Alfred wanted, cans in alphabetical order with the baking supplies all together and the pasta all in tall glass jars, with a few quirks: Damian's snacks lined up on a lower shelf the way he liked them, Dick's cereals in the usual disarray because he never closed them back up when he came to visit—it was all the same, down to the way that Cass had scrawled across her various trail mixes: TIM DO NOT EAT and TIM CAN EAT.

He found the teas, meticulously lined up by favorites instead of alphabetical order.

"It's all the same." Jason's voice was carefully flat. He had thrown both doors to the fridge wide open, and he was staring inside. His knuckles were white on the door handles. "This could be the real fucking thing."

Tim took down the tea. Grabbed some snacks. Bundled it all to the kitchen table. It felt mechanical. He was busy telling himself that it was not home, and that at any second, some new horror was going to come out. As it was, it was a fresh kind of terrible to realize that he was subconsciously relaxing, his body used to being able to let go when it was inside this house. *We know where we are. We're safe here.*

WE'RE NOT, Tim screamed back at himself, even as he opened his favorite box of crackers and began to eat them.

"Give me that," Jason snapped.

Tim handed him the tea. Jason made tea. Put one cup in front of Tim, one in front of himself. Neither of them had much of an appetite, but they ate enough to push them forward, feeling returning to all of their limbs. They did, indeed, leave puddles, and Tim wondered if the not-Alfred thing was going to eat them for it.

At some point, Tim said, "You think this is the end? The last test?"

Jason put down his tea and said, "Yeah. I do."

They finished eating. Both of them cleaned wordlessly, even though there really was no point to it.

When they stepped back out of the kitchen, it was not the same. The lights were dimmer, flickering. Thick cobwebs had gathered in the corners, even though the rest of the house was spotless.

The house felt strange, now. Hungry. Slow, and old.

They walked back through the hallway to the entry room, where the staircase was.

The lights buzzed as they wavered again. Tim looked up at them warily. He didn't know if they were really dimming, but he did know that he did not want to be in this house when the lights went out.

The thing in the corner with Alfred's face was still there, curled up in a great black coil. They couldn't see Alfred, though, so Tim started cautiously going up the stairs.

"I fucking hate this," muttered Jason from behind him, following him. "Haven't been up these stairs in years and the first time it happens it's in a fucking haunted house replica . . ."

The house was not helpful. It did not give them an obvious direction, which immediately put Tim into a worse mood than he was already in. He wanted this part to be the fast part, and of course this was when things got muddled.

They got to the landing, and Tim was trying to decide which way to go when there was an explosive *BANGBANGBANG* from behind them.

The temperature dropped.

Tick tock tick tock tick tock, the clock said.

Tim whirled. Dread sunk its claws into his heart almost before his conscious mind gave him a reason for it. This fear was old, something that had nested in his bones since he was a child, but it was always ready to reawaken, no matter how long it had been.

The door shook again as someone from the other side slammed a big fist against it: *BANGBANGBANG.*

Alfred's voice said, lightly chastising, "It's not polite to keep people waiting, you know." Its many legs tapped against the wood paneling as it moved a little, uncoiled a bit.

The lights wavered again as the person banged, and banged, and banged.

"Well," said Jason, voice annoyed and not afraid, "it can't get any worse than—"

"No," said Tim. He couldn't tear his eyes from the door. Once was bad enough, the damn bridge had been bad enough, but *this*—

"Why—"

"Just don't," said Tim. His voice was even, but he heard the strange edge to it, the fear making itself heard somehow. He was inching backwards without consciously thinking about it. "Don't. Please don't."

Jason looked back at him: confused, but trusting Tim's reaction. This cooled some of Tim's blank terror—whatever was happening, Jason was with him. Jason put a hand out towards Tim and looked back at the door. "You expecting somebody?"

Tim said, "It's one of my memories. Jason, don't. Don't." The safety

cable grew taut between them; Tim couldn't move any more backwards.

"Come now, Master Timothy," chided Alfred's voice again, and the thing was *moving*— uncoiling and uncoiling and uncoiling, great black swaths of body swarming across the ceiling, lowering the head down the stairs, towards the door. "Don't keep people waiting at the door, especially your father."

BANGBANGBANG.

"Oh, well," Jason said, "fuck that."

The great black thing reached the door. It was too big to stop.

Jason moved, shoving at Tim, but Tim didn't need any urging. They ran down the lit hallway. There was a tremendous crash behind them, the door ripping open. A howl of wind exploded through the air, chased them down the hallway.

Tim grabbed the first door on the left and bolted into it, dragging Jason behind him. He slammed it, then put his back to it. It was dark, but he knew it was one of the libraries.

Steps thundered up the stairs.

Tim shut his eyes. He knew that this house was making those steps sound bigger, that Jack Drake had never been large enough to shake a house, but just then, he felt all of seven years old again, knowing that Jack was angry, knowing there was nowhere he could hide from Jack's rage.

Control. He was in control, he wouldn't do this—he *couldn't* do this, not in here, not right now—

The steps were getting closer. Slowing down.

A hand grabbed his arm and towed him to the side, making the decision for him. Jason shoved Tim into a corner and stood next to him, watching the door. Jason's hand was in his pocket, where his gun was. His other hand didn't let go of Tim's arm.

The steps slowed even more. *Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.*

The crack under the door spilled the only light in the room. A shadow fell across it. Stopped.

Tim held his breath. The fact that Jason was there steadied him a little—reminded him he wasn't seven, and he wasn't alone. He was a highly trained fighter. He had been Robin. He would be fine. It was fine. Jason's fingers were steady and tight.

He chanted it to himself: *I'm fine. It's going to be fine. I'm fine.*

Nothing dulled the old terror in his heart. His heart thundered in his ears, and it felt loud enough to shake the world.

He watched the shadow under the door. They were going to be found. They were going to be found. His father was going to throw open the door and—

Tim couldn't think of anything worse than his father finding him.

The shadow moved on. The huge steps slowly walked away, and after a time, they disappeared altogether.

The yellow light under the door changed as both of them sat there in the darkness of the library. It dimmed, taking on a gray cast. The bookshelves made strange shapes in the dark.

"Sorry," whispered Tim.

Jason's voice was equally quiet when he said, "For what?" He was still watching the door, his eyes glinting in the faint light.

"I shouldn't have—" Hot shame coursed through him. He shook his head back and forth, twice. "Frozen," Tim finished, bitterly, stepping out of the corner. "I shouldn't have frozen."

"Bad dads have a way of doing that to you," Jason said, in a way that said that he was experienced with what bad dads did to you. His eyes were still fixed narrowly on the door. "Yours was one of them, huh?"

"It wasn't like—" Tim still felt guilty, years later. He felt that it was in poor conscience to badmouth somebody when it was your fault they were dead. "I . . . he wasn't a bad person."

Jason turned his gaze on Tim, expression unfathomable except for his mouth, which was a thin, unhappy line. "The memory that it was replaying. What was it? How did it end?"

Tim looked at the floor. Tugged absently at the safety cable. "Sort of like that. I was hiding in here."

“Why were you hiding?” Jason’s voice was neutral, but in a way that suggested he was being careful about making it so.

Jason had answered all of his questions about his past, no matter how hard they were. Tim rewarded honesty with honesty.

“He hurt me,” Tim said finally, clipped and professional. He took a deep breath. “He was . . . really, really bad that night. I panicked. I ran. Came here. Ran straight up the stairs, right past everybody, and hid in here, in this room. Bruce came in—he was trying to talk to me, to get me to tell him what had happened, when Jack started knocking at the door, just like that. I thought he was going to break that door down. I’d never been so scared in my life. I didn’t know Bruce as well then . . . I was sure he was going to just give me back to Jack when Jack told him I was overreacting, because that’s what Jack used to do after anything like that . . . happened. Alfred answered it, and Bruce asked me if I wanted to go back with Jack or stay with him. I told him I wanted to stay with him.”

Tim stared off into the shadows of the room. He could nearly feel it, that day. Bruce had left the room, and Tim had felt like he was shaking apart until Dick had curled around him so tight that it sort of felt like he was being suffocated, but in a good way.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Dick had said, into his hair. “No one is going to take you away from here.”

He had said it with such conviction that Tim had forgotten to be afraid.

“Bruce went downstairs and lied to Jack’s face,” Tim said. “Said he hadn’t seen me, pretended Alfred had just woken him up, and asked if the police should be involved, and everything. It made my dad insane. He told . . . Bruce that I was a liar, that I liked to spin stories, make stuff up. But Bruce never believed him. He always believed me.”

That night had been everything to Tim. He would never be able to describe the way something dark and furious and helpless that lived inside of him had been released that night, just by being believed by someone. The feeling that Tim had had when Bruce had come back in after lying to Jack outright, just because Tim had asked him to, and told Tim that if he wanted, Tim would never have to go back and live with Jack again. And Tim never had.

Tim shook his head again. “That’s it,” he said, voice brittle. “I just don’t want to see him.”

Jason just put a hand to the back of Tim's neck and ruffled the hair there, squeezing a little.

When they stepped out into the hallway, the light was different. The yellow had leached out of it, and the world was gray.

There was no part of Tim that wanted to keep going through this house. But they crept down the hallway anyway.

It was as bad as when they had first gone through the tunnels. There were lights under doors, muffled conversations, wailing. But this time it was all their family. They heard Dick cry out more than once. Alfred called their names. Cass sobbing in her bedroom. But nothing ever led anywhere—they could never trace Dick or Alfred's voices, and when Tim opened the door to Cass' bedroom, he found her—or some horrific, twisted version of her—tangled in a silky spider's sac, eyes black all the way through and fixed on Tim.

When she began to move, wriggling out of the sac, Jason grabbed the door and slammed it shut again.

The next door they opened, one that should have led to one of Bruce's studies, they found a cave, riddled with stalactites and stalagmites. It smelled like chemicals, or underground, or death. A lake bubbled and hissed in the middle, a vicious shade of poisonous green. Steam began to seep down around their shoes.

Jason went paper-white, and it was Tim who slammed that door. He pretended not to notice as Jason took long minutes to pull himself back together. Tim felt the shuddering through the cable that tied them together.

They were more careful with doors after that.

It grew darker still. It got quiet again. They went up another staircase. Everything was just a little twisted, just a little stretched.

The house began to fall apart around them. Chairs were broken. Cobwebs waved. The curtains were decomposing, the wood rotting. The house creaked and groaned.

They made it to the landing of the east wing, where the bedrooms were.

Tim automatically looked toward the ceiling. This time, the great black thing that wore Alfred's face was again fixed to the ceiling.

It still had Alfred's face, but Alfred's face was dead now. Barely visible in the gloom, its blue lips curled a little, filmy eyes watching Tim and Jason.

There were other things on the ceiling, too. Hairless. Colorless. They were hanging upside down.

When Tim accidentally nudged part of a wooden bureau, the creatures stirred a little, but didn't move too much.

Then Jason kicked at an umbrella stand, the sound like a gunshot in the quiet. It sent a cloud of dust puffing into the air.

Instantly, the things on the ceiling snarled, scuttled in a strange, long-limbed cacophony. Their batlike wings made a buzzing sound all together.

Tim grabbed Jason's arm and held him still, grabbing the arm that was raising the gun to prevent him from shooting.

Jason glared at Tim, but didn't move. Tim made a *shh* shape with his mouth.

Slowly, the things on the ceiling settled again. Closed their wings.

Alfred's dead face smirked a little, amused. Its big black body shifted a little again, rippling, and Alfred's face disappeared.

Jason nudged Tim. Nodded towards the east wing.

Tim did not want to go that way, so that was probably the way they were supposed to go. He was once again struck with the feeling that whatever they were inside, it was very slow, and very old.

Tim and Jason exchanged a glance. Keeping an eye on the things on the ceiling, they crept into the east wing.

The hallways seemed longer, and Tim couldn't tell if that was because they were actually longer or because every part of him was wound like a spring, ready for something to leap from the shadows.

It was so, so quiet. Tim wanted to talk to Jason, just to ease the pressure of the silence, but he didn't want anything to hear them. So they walked on, both of them totally silent, creeping in the way that only thieves and Bats knew how to creep.

They passed the great mirror in the hall, the one with the ornate

gilded edges. That meant that they were heading up towards the wing with the bedrooms.

Tim looked in the mirror and startled backwards.

Jason said, “What—” Immediately followed by a quiet, “Fuck.”

It was Damian again, visible through the dusty glass. Domino off, face bruised and scratched, hands and feet tied. He stared at them with huge eyes, made a muffled sound through his gag. Desperation lined every inch of his body. He strained towards them.

“It’s not real.” Tim forced himself to look away. “It’s not real.”

Jason said, flat, “It’s gone.” Then, “Why am I the only one reflected?”

Tim looked back

He wasn’t in the mirror. It was just the other side of the hall with its faded portraits reflected back. Jason stood next to him, eyeing himself distrustfully in the mirror.

Tim said, “Didn’t that thing say to watch the mirrors—”

He didn’t quite finish, because the Jason in the mirror turned to look at Tim, independent of the real Jason.

His eyes were different.

Jason instantly stepped out of frame.

The reflection-Jason remained. It was still staring at Tim.

Tim realized what was wrong about it. The mirror-Jason’s eyes were green: the poisonous, vicious green of that bubbling vat.

The Jason outside of the mirror looked hostile, eyes dark. He said, “Leave it. Let’s go.”

Tim was happy to leave it. They walked on. Something crept after them in the way that only thieves and Bats know how to creep.

They got ever closer to the bedroom hallway.

“Do you think—” Tim hesitated. “I just. We haven’t seen Bruce yet, and his bedroom—”

“No,” said Jason. He was shaking his head.

“I mean,” said Tim, who didn’t want to go in any more than Jason did, “it makes a sick sort of sense—”

“You can’t make me, Tim.” There was something desperate in Jason’s eyes, an animal held by its throat. He backed away from him until their cable stretched taut. “You can’t. Tim, I—the last time I went in there was because I had a nightmare, okay? The last time—five years ago—you can’t—I can’t do that, okay? I just can’t. Don’t make me.”

Tim remembered how Jason had let him run when he wanted to run from his father. He thought about destroying more of Jason’s few good memories.

He said, “Okay. Then we don’t go in there.” Like it was that easy.

Jason’s shoulders slumped a little. He looked at Tim and then away, but not before Tim saw his shame, saw his relief.

Jason said, “Okay.”

They walked on.

There was a sitting room just before the hallway with the bedrooms. Tim peered into it out of habit; it was as derelict as everything else, furniture broken, dust heavy, shadows deep. Another large mirror hung on the wall, filmy and smudged—Tim had never realized how many mirrors were in this exact wing of the house.

A shadow loomed, moved.

Before Tim could react, his father was leaning against the doorjamb, a crystal glass full of brandy swilling offhandedly in his left hand, looking much more real than anything in the decomposing room behind him. His tie was hanging around his neck. His waistcoat was unbuttoned. He had just come back from a gala, and that powerful cruelty was building in his eyes. Tim knew what was going to happen before it did, because Tim had been here before.

“Timmy,” he said casually, and grabbed Tim around his neck.

He yanked Tim into the sitting room and slammed him against the wall so hard that stars burst across his vision.

It was difficult for Tim to concentrate on anything besides the giant

hand around his throat and his father's face in his, so it took him a moment to realize what Jason was occupied with, and why the cable around his waist had gone slack.

After he freed himself from his father by methodically breaking several of his fingers, he turned and found two Jasons trying to beat the shit out of each other.

The mirror. He was so stupid. And they were virtually impossible to tell apart.

While Tim was distracted, his father cracked him across his face. His head met the wall again.

"Look at me while I'm talking to you, Timothy," his father said, low and precise and vicious. It was the voice that shoved Tim back years of his life, blowing apart his concentration.

The two Jasons grappled. They had the same skill set, the same expert way with deadly blunt force. Tim dodged his father, slipped through his grasp. His father wasn't his target; his father wasn't his problem. That other Jason was.

One of the Jasons hurled the other Jason away from him, and he crashed into a table, blowing it apart. The first was on him in an instant. They rolled away, jabbing punches and gouging at jugular veins, bruising strength matching bruising strength.

Tim's father drove his knuckles into Tim's injured side.

Pain exploded through his entire body, and Tim let out a sharp sound, staggering away. Jack bore down on him again, face twisted, an animal of popping veins and flying spittle.

The pain jarred Tim back into the present, slamming him into gear. Tim punched his father sharply underneath his jaw, then used the full force of his body to land a vicious kick to his sternum. His father went down, clutching at his probably broken ribs, cursing roundly.

That taken care of, he turned back to the other fight, and the task of trying to figure out which Jason was which.

One had blood pouring from a broken nose. The other had a gash in his shoulder from a knife. It was a brutal fight, and neither could keep a grip on the other long enough for a kill.

Because that was what this would come down to. One would end up the winner, and one would end up dead, and if Tim chose to help and picked wrong—

One of them got hold of a gun. The first pointed it in the face of the other, the one with the broken nose, in one swift, clean motion, quick as the dive of a hawk. The click of the safety being taken off was the loudest sound in the world. They were far enough apart that if the first decided to fire, that would be it.

Tim stood, intending to go for the Jason with the gun. If he grabbed that Jason's arm and that Jason tried to kill him, he'd have his answer, and he couldn't stand by while—

He didn't finish rising. His father grabbed him from behind and shoved him to the floor, closing his broken fingers around Tim's throat again. Tim choked, went for his eyes, but it did no good; this Jack Drake was not human, and never had been. Tim bucked a little, legs bicycling, sent an open-handed punch to Jack's throat, but Jack just shoved down harder, face fixed in a snarl.

The Jason holding the gun swiveled and pointed it at Tim's father and shot him, twice.

The weight of Jack Drake collapsed on top of Tim, heavy and damning. Tim gasped once, twice. Instead of blood, waves of sand began to pour from Jack's head, until he was shapeless and awkward: a puppet with its strings cut.

Tim scrabbled, shoved him off. He got ever lighter even as Tim pushed. His eyes stayed the same, and they stared into Tim's, glassy and dead and—

Tim scrambled away from him, something inside of him coming undone—it was that day, it was that day again, and he was too late, and his father had never been good, but it was *his father*—

He looked up. Yelled, " *Jason—*"

The real Jason, the one who had just saved Tim's life, didn't turn fast enough. The Jason with the broken nose, the false one, grabbed him in a bruising hold, dragged him backwards, and into the dirty mirror on the wall.

Both of them vanished in an instant, without a ripple, without a sound. The only thing reflected was Tim's own white face in an empty

room. And Jason was gone.

And Jason was gone.

There was a beat of silence. Tim forced himself to his feet, coughing through his abused throat.

Tim went to the mirror. Pushed on it—every inch of it. When that did nothing, he looked behind it. After that, too, yielded nothing, he ripped it from the wall just to hear it smash, crystalline shards spraying over the floor.

When it went silent again, Tim let the sound that had been building in his chest rip out of his throat. He stood there, facing the broken mirror, and then carefully pressed a hand over his mouth so he wouldn't make any more noise, because he felt that more was in him, for some reason. He felt wildly out of control. He just felt wild, actually. He was distantly aware of the fact that he was shaking all over.

Tim stood there for a long time. His brain kept jerking a little, a car engine trying to start. He needed a new plan. He needed to find something to do. Something to—

There was nothing but the silence, and the pounding of his pulse. He kept circling back to Jack's face. Jason vanishing. Jack's face. Jason vanishing.

He could not make any sound. The last thing he needed was one of those jellyish *things* in the hallway to come flapping in and—

Well. Maybe that *was* the solution. Bang around enough, see if something would come and finish what Jack Drake's ghost had started —

"You shouldn't be in here with all that glass, kiddo."

Tim turned around.

The world was smudged, like his eyes had been pressed by dirty fingerprints. Smeared. Tim couldn't bring himself to care, and when he blinked, it took a long time. Pins and needles began to prickle at his elbows, in his neck.

The man standing in the doorway was two people. One person. Two people. A kaleidoscope, focusing and spinning away again. It was

Bruce. It was Jack, when he was in a good mood. *He's never really in a good mood.* It was Bruce. It was Jack, in a good mood. His stance was relaxed, open. If Tim embraced that man, he wouldn't be turned away. It was Bruce.

This room was cold, Tim realized dully. Cold and blue and dark. Dust and sand and glass everywhere. The hallway behind the man was warm and inviting, lamplight golden and spilling, leaking enticingly around his dad's feet.

"Come on," Bruce or Jack said. The voice was warm too. The walls were warping. Tim's dad held out a hand to him. "Let's go."

Jack again. "Your mother's waiting, Tim. She's been waiting for a while. Come on."

Tim walked forward. It was like moving through molasses. Tim was forgetting something. Tim was forgetting someone.

Jay.

Tim turned back toward the shattered mirror. The walls were bleeding.

"Son," said the man, "he won't be that way. Come with me."

It was Jack. Bruce would never leave one of his children out alone in the dark.

Tim looked at Jack. His big hand was still outstretched, and it was not a hand to hit, or harm.

Tim wanted it to be true so badly. So it was.

In the shards of the mirror, he saw himself again, but he wasn't dirty or covered in cobwebs or frightened. He was eight. He was eight, and it was all right.

He went over and took Jack's hand. The wrist was wearing Bruce's father's watch, the one that Jason had fixed for him last year and left on the hood of the Batmobile instead of wishing him happy birthday like a normal person.

Jason . . .

Jack ushered him out of that dark, cold room. Warmth washed over him like he'd sunk into a hot bath.

It wasn't Wayne Manor anymore. The pictures were different, the paintings more vibrant, portrayals of scenes all around the world, of archaeological digs. Shelves held antiquities coveted by the best museums, statues and jewelry and shawls and carvings. Large plants curled in corners.

Tim's childhood. He was home. It had taken a long time, but he'd made it. This was what he'd been trying to find, wasn't it?

The pins and needles prickled harder. *No,* whispered a voice somewhere in the back of his mind. *You're not home.* But that voice was difficult to hear.

Jack shut the door behind him, and the voice faded altogether.

His father set a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"You don't have to be afraid," he said. The gentleness was Bruce's. It didn't bother Tim that both of his dads were there. He wanted them there. He wanted this. When he looked up, it didn't bother him that he couldn't tell which was which, that the facial features were indistinct, blurred.

"Come on," his father said again, and Tim went with him down the hall.

—

Jason crashed into the opposite wall and blindly lunged for his counterpart, bracing for another hit in the same moment.

His mirror counterpart wasn't there. His fist swung through empty air.

Jason was alone, in the same room that he had just fought and won and lost in. His snapped safety cable swung uselessly at his waist, taunting him.

Jason turned around, then around again.

"Tim," he said. Then he shouted it. "*Tim!*"

There was no one. When his evil twin had dragged him through the mirror , he had taken him somewhere else. Somewhere Tim wasn't.

The dread that he had been holding at bay rushed up his throat, and terror owned him for several long minutes. He pressed his fingers into his eyelids until he saw bursts of color behind them. He couldn't be

alone. He couldn't do this hellhole alone. He understood now why someone had only lasted minutes in here. He couldn't do this.

He thought about Tim alone on his side of the mirror with his father's body, and Jason thought he was going to be sick.

When he lowered his hands from his eyes, another part of his past stood in front of him, regarding him anxiously.

Jason said, "Tell me how to find him again."

His younger self shook his head. "I'm just a reflection. I only know what you know."

"You knew when I needed to go talk to Sparrow."

"I just know you need to find him fast," his younger self said. "Silia's really pulling out all the stops for this. She wants him dead. You're both too close to the end."

"God," said Jason. "*Christ."* He gulped air, willing his heartbeat to slow. He couldn't let panic have him. He looked around at his decrepit, abandoned home. "Okay. Okay."

Jason paced, then left the room, left his younger self behind. He needed to look—

He didn't know where he was supposed to look. He didn't know even faintly where to start.

Fucking hell.

He went back to the front door, intending to ask the monstrous Alfred for an answer—or threaten him into giving Jason an answer—but the main hall was deserted, even of creepy little monsters.

He went back to the front door, wondering if he should leave, wondering if he *could* leave, wondering if Tim was somehow out there somewhere, but the glow of light glimmered out of the corner of his eye.

Jason turned.

The hallway beside the staircase had an even beam of bright light cutting through the darkness.

It was coming from the kitchen.

The younger version of Jason was standing on the stairs. He looked real, realer than the world falling apart around him. He wasn't wearing his Robin costume—just jeans, and a favorite T-shirt of his from a baseball game that he and Bruce had attended, and a jacket that had a rip in the elbow from when he'd slipped and fallen down the stairs in the Cave. Jason could remember being that boy so clearly just then—and he had been belligerent, and feisty, and afraid. The world was a scary place.

Jason crept to the kitchen. Opened the door wider. The smell of pancakes wafted through the air.

In the warm light of the kitchen, Bruce was sitting at the kitchen table in a bathrobe, absentmindedly rubbing his temple as he scanned something on a thin iPad.

Something about this felt—

Alfred was at the counter, a wide griddle in front of him. He flipped one pancake, two.

Bruce looked up at him. A genuine, tired smile warmed his face. "Hello, Jaylad. Couldn't sleep?"

And Jason knew what Alfred was going to say before he said it. Without turning around, Alfred said, "I believe midnight snacks run in this family. Fancy some food, Master Jason?"

A memory. One of his memories. Six years back. He'd had a nightmare, and this was the sight he'd been met with when he came downstairs. These two people who had always been waiting for him.

In a strange, eerily certain way, Jason suddenly knew that if he went in there, he could stay that way forever. He would be as unchanging and permanent as the rest of the ghosts here, inside of his boyhood evermore. The Labyrinth would give him this gift, this curse: he could go home, but not really. He could go in there, and forget that Tim had ever existed, and he could be with his family again, in a way that he could never be now. He could be alive again by giving up his life. This place was a monster, it was true. It knew all his fears, and it was killing him and Tim slowly.

But it knew all his good places, too. And it would let him have them.

And he wanted it. He wanted it so badly it cleaved him in two. For just a moment, he let himself want it.

Then he turned around and walked back to the stairs. The boy was still there.

His younger self said, “Don’t leave me here alone.”

“I’m not,” Jason said.

This boy had not been alone in the real world, and Jason wasn’t going to leave him alone in this one.

He took his younger self’s hand and walked him down the stairs, back through the house. Their home. The only one that mattered.

He remembered. He remembered. He remembered.

It was dark, but no longer frightening. The moon was outside the windows. Everything was shadows, but squeaky clean, smelling of Alfred’s lavender cleaner and wood polish. The world was night, and gentle.

The years undid themselves. Promises unbroke, and the world unfractured.

Jason put his younger self ahead of him. The young Jason was wearing his pajamas, his hair bed-mussed.

He stood aside, and his fifteen-year-old self walked in and went back where he belonged.

“Hello, Jaylad. Couldn’t sleep?”

“I believe midnight snacks run in this family. Fancy some food, Master Jason?”

Jason watched for another moment as the boy went to Bruce, and Bruce reached up and ruffled his hair gently. A father, who was looking at his son like he loved him.

Then he closed the door.

And he knew where Tim was.

Chapter 11

Jack-Bruce-Jack led Tim to the bright kitchen, where copper pans gleamed on the walls and there was a hot drink waiting. Jack sat with him, watched him. Tim gulped it down, and all the aches and pains in his body disappeared. He was whole and fed and rested, no stab wounds or blisters or burns anywhere.

Jack said, “Go on upstairs, son. Say good night to your mother.”

There was an irrelevant voice inside of him again, and it was screaming. Tim ignored it. Jack-Bruce-Jack ruffled his hair as he went by, padding up the stairs obediently. The walls were strange, and when Tim touched them, they were damp and webbed. It didn’t bother him. He was going to say good night to his mother. The portraits and statues watched him as he went by. He knew something was wrong, and he didn’t care.

A little girl with white-blond hair was sitting on the stairs, watching him. She was silent as he walked past, and Tim let it slide out of his mind until he forgot it.

He opened the door to his own bedroom. There was his bed, and his posters, and his cameras, and his desk.

In the corner in his favorite overstuffed armchair, Janet Drake sat reading a book with the overhead lamp on. It gave her a halo of light. Her long brown hair was down, curling over her shoulders, and she was wearing her casual at-home clothes, which meant she intended to stay for at least a few days. The bedcovers were pulled back, waiting for him. Outside, the stars shimmered, and the moon was round and full.

Tim could have stood there and looked at her forever. It had been so long, and he was just now realizing that he had started to forget what she looked like. There she was: his mother. It didn’t matter how he felt about her. It was his mother.

Tim said, “Hi, Mom.”

If this had really been all those years ago, she would have looked up with a quick, impersonal smile, asked after his schoolwork, told him to straighten his posture. If this had really been all those years ago she wouldn’t have been in his bedroom at all.

But this wasn't that. When this woman looked up and saw him, her face transformed. A radiant smile spread over her face, lighting up her eyes. His mother was so glad to see him, only him, and that was all Tim had ever wanted.

"Hello, sweetheart," she said, putting a bookmark in and setting her book aside. "Oh, it's been so long, honey. I've been waiting so long for you."

"Sorry," Tim said, smiling helplessly at her. He was so excited to see her—he had missed her so much. Tim had been missing his mother for as long as he had known her.

"Oh, baby," she said, sitting on the edge of his bed. "Come here. Come here. Oh, Timmy. I've missed you so much."

Tim moved toward her. He was so happy to see her. Something was wrong. He didn't care. His mother was happy to see him.

She held out her arms. Tim couldn't remember the last time his mom had hugged him.

Behind him, the door slammed open, ricocheting against the opposite wall with the force of the hit.

Tim was startled into turning around.

There was someone standing there, someone with wild blue eyes, a white streak in black hair. Tim knew him. Tim didn't know him. Tim knew . . . something.

"Come here, honey," his mother coaxed, unbothered by the interruption. "Come see me."

"What? No," said the person in the doorway. "What are you doing?" Then, when Tim began to turn away, he said, "Tim?"

Tim looked at his mother, who was still smiling, still glad to see him.

"Tim." There was a note of horror in the voice now. "Tim, stop it. *Don't.*"

Tim looked at the young man, stared at him some more. His face was smudged, too, but in a way that felt deliberate. There was something wrong with Tim's eyes. The young man in the doorway was holding on to both sides of the doorframe, and he kept looking from Tim's face

to the floor and back again.

“Tim,” said the person in the doorway, sounding a little desperate now. “Tim. Come here.”

“Oh, you don’t want to go with him,” said his mother, laughing just a bit. This interloper was amusing to her, then. “Come let me tuck you in. I love you, sweetheart, come to bed.”

“You leave him *alone,”* said the person in the doorway, an ugly snarl in his voice.

“You see? See how angry he is. Remember? He’s hurt you before.” When Tim looked back at her, the room glowed invitingly, and she held out her lovely hands again, her eyes warm. She had never looked that warm in her life. “Oh, Timmy, I know how lonely you’ve been. How sad. Sweetheart, that’s all over now.” Her eyes were earnest, promising. “You don’t have to be alone again, or feel forgotten ever again. You can stay here with me.”

Tim took a step towards his mother. He thought that there might be something wrong with the floor, but he didn’t mind.

“Tim, *stop!* Please, please stop, for the love of God. Don’t take another step. I mean it, asshole, *stop it!”*

Tim had never heard Jason sound like that before.

The name knocked whatever record was going in his head askew.

Jason. *Jason.*

Tim turned back. “Jason.”

“*Yes,* you dipshit.” Jason’s face was a violence of relief, of anger, of fear. His features were still blurred, but Tim thought it might have been him—Tim’s own eyes were wrong, balancing two realities.

Jason was dead. Jason wasn’t coming back. His double had killed him —

Jason said, “Come here *right now.* Don’t listen to her. Remember where we are.”

“Tim.” His mother stood up. She looked anxious now, eyes darker, looking between the two of them. She and Jason did not exist on the same plane—trying to look between them made Tim’s head pound.

“Don’t go with him. He wants to take you away to hurt you. It’s not really him, Tim, it’s a monster.”

Jason’s voice was incensed, immediate. “It *is* me, and I would *never.”*

“But you have,” Janet cried at him, holding a hand out to Tim. She stepped closer again, anxious, enticing. “Tim. My little one. Come and be with me.”

Tim was eight, and all he wanted was his mother to love him.

He inched forward another step.

“Don’t *listen* to her!” Jason’s voice had lost all of its composure. His entire body was straining, like he would have launched himself into the room if he could have, but something wasn’t letting him. “Tim, *do not take another step,* do you hear me? For God’s sake. *Don’t* take another step.” If Tim wasn’t so disoriented, he would have said Jason was begging him.

His mother sat on the edge of his bed and held her arms out again. “Come here, honey,” she said, and he’d had a long day. And he could go be with her, and never feel anything bad ever again. “Come home to me.”

And Tim hesitated.

“*That’s not home, Tim.”* Jason’s voice whipped through Tim’s thoughts. “You said we were going home together. And we are, goddammit. *Tim.* Get your ass back here now. We’re going home, I promise, okay?” His voice cracked, and the iron confidence he’d thrown on slipped off again. “*Please* come back here, please, Tim, please trust me.”

“Tim.” His mother’s voice was so loving, so coaxing. “Come here.”

He wanted to. So badly.

Instead, he turned and he ran to the door.

His mother screamed. “No! No, Tim, baby, no, no, no—”

She got up. Ran after him.

Jason grabbed Tim and bodily pulled him from the room, slamming the door himself, and then they ran.

The plants grew legs. Jason and Tim stuck to the walls like flies, every

step a wet, disastrous struggle. Tim could hear Janet sobbing, pleading, crying for him on the other side of his childhood bedroom door. Screaming for Tim like her heart was smashing with every step he ran away from her.

Tim was nearly blind, his eyes jumbling two houses together, his childhood home flickering golden and loving against a dead, decaying world.

They went down an excruciatingly long hallway. Now he could hear the tremendous steps of his father coming, and Tim couldn't run fast enough away.

Down the stairs. The steps were louder. The world itself was screaming now.

Then Jason pulled him through another door, somehow, some way, and then hurled that door shut.

Tim's chest heaved. They were back in Wayne Manor, and it was even more rotted than before: the light was dim and blue, and crumbling vines trailed from gaping holes in the ceiling, the walls barren and apocalyptic. The door Jason had just slammed was the door to Tim's bedroom.

The silence was deafening after Janet's cries.

"Come here. Come here—"

"Don't, *don't*—"

"Hold still, you dipshit. God." Jason's voice was shaking. His everything was shaking. He pushed his thumbs against Tim's eyes wiped something away. When Tim opened his eyes again, blinking hard, Jason's fingertips had come away blackened.

Jason took Tim's chin and held it still so he could look at Tim's face. Tim wrenched away. He couldn't bear to meet Jason's eyes. Reality, or whatever screwed up reality this was, was filtering back in. He didn't know what he'd just nearly done, but it hadn't been his—

Of course it hadn't. Janet had never wanted him, not ever. She would never have screamed for him, begged for him that way.

Tim felt something rising inside of him, something choking and awful and tarlike.

He could hear himself breathing, fast and rapid. “You . . . how . . . are you real?”

A stupid, stupid question in a place like this. This Jason would say yes, and then when he turned his back . . .

Jason looked at him. “You paranoid shit,” he said, but it didn’t sound accusing. It sounded like he was trying and failing to get himself together. “I broke that other guy’s nose, you know I did.”

“I . . . how did you . . .” All of Tim’s injuries and pains had come back all at once, along with his dread and panic. He felt shattered, undone.

“Don’t know.” Jason sounded distressed, or tired, or angry, or all three. “Fell through a mirror, but I guess it was another fucked up trick, because here you are.”

“Where’d your double go?”

“He wanted you,” Jason said. “After you were gone he just sort of disappeared.”

Tim was startled, a jarring feeling against his deadened horror. “He wanted *me?* How do you know he wanted me?”

“He went for you first. And, you know, I . . . ” Jason stopped, then pushed on, flat and lifeless, “I figured. Your bad memories, and all that.”

If Tim had had himself together, he would have assured Jason that there wasn’t any part of him that was afraid of Jason anymore. He would have said that the only thing he was afraid of now was this place killing Jason for real.

Jason said, “I just . . . felt like you were in the bedrooms. Tried mine first, just in case.”

His voice had something in it that Tim felt shouldn’t be pushed, but Tim pushed anyway. His lungs felt like he was being vacuum compressed. “What was in yours?”

“The warehouse. The one where . . . ” Jason didn’t, or couldn’t, finish. He looked away and added hoarsely, “Didn’t have a bomb in it this time, anyway.”

It struck Tim right through his chest, then, that Jason had been

looking for him. Jason had looked for him, while Tim had just . . . stopped. Let himself fall straight into a trap. He'd let Jason down, and in that world of horrors, that felt like the very worst thing.

"I . . . " Tim still didn't look back at Jason. He tapped a fist against the wall, then again and again. Then he was stuttering, hardly aware of what he was saying, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I shouldn't have . . . she's not . . . she wasn't even . . . "

His throat closed, and all at once, the sounds that he had been pushing down inside of himself since Jason had disappeared began to rip out of him, shaking his entire body. He fell against the wall, feeling like he was going to tear himself out of his own body.

Jason pulled him away from the wall and crushed Tim to him, tight and immediate. Jason hugged like Bruce did, like all of Bruce's children did, because Bruce was where they'd learned. Tim fisted both of his hands into Jason's jacket and cried.

Tim kept trying to drag himself away from the edge, pull himself together, but he kept seeing his mother's face. His mother's glad face, Alfred's dead one, their home decaying around them. His childhood bedroom. The fact that he was beginning to suspect that they would never get out of here, not ever.

They remained that way until they were sitting against the wall, both of them too tired and hurting to stay standing. Jason's cheek was pressed to Tim's shoulder, and Tim could feel him shaking still.

After a long time, Tim said again, "I'm sorry."

"Shut up," said Jason.

"I thought you were dead," Tim said.

"Give me a little more credit," Jason muttered. "And I wasn't going to leave you alone."

Tim pulled away, sat against the wall. He pushed his palms into his eyes and rubbed, then looked around, absently pressing a hand to his stab wound. It was an active, terrible pain now, and he knew his father's ghost had done a number on it when he'd hit it, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

Nothing but silence and decay. Jason had blood on his shoulder and sticky cobwebs on his jacket, on his black jeans, dust in his hair, white

streak faded to gray in the odd, dim light. He looked exhausted, bruised, faded, staring off down the hallway.

“So,” Tim said, voice ragged. “What now?”

Jason looked back at him, and his face said that he was beginning to suspect that they would never get out of here, not ever.

What he said was, “Fuck if I know.”

Tim’s ever-analytical brain tiredly slogged through their options. The answer was not great: they were in a crumbling, rotting building that wanted to kill them. They had lost their packs somewhere, and with them their spare weapons. They were too tired to do anything more than sit. Tim’s feet honestly felt like if he put weight on them one more time they were going to cease to exist out of sheer protest.

He was still cataloging when a distinctive rattle disturbed the silence.

Jason lifted his head.

It was a clinking rattle. A step, shuffle. Step, shuffle, rattle.

The rattle of chains.

Tim was afraid of it even before the voice came.

“Ah, the young Robin. My favorite Robin. We meet here again. For a repeat of our last encounter, perhaps? Time will only tell . . . "

Tim’s mind wrenched itself a little when he heard the laugh, gurgling and lilting.

Jason was staring straight ahead now, face empty, eyes streaked and unrecognizable. He didn’t, or couldn’t, move, so Tim stood up and moved between Jason and the voice.

The chains were louder now. The high voice said, “Made me so proud, you know . . . falling out with the batty bat bat . . . he’s not going to come running this time, is he? Oh, but I remember a time he did come running. But he was just a bit too late, you know . . . *dreadful* thing, really . . .” The laughter again.

Jason said, barely any sound in his voice at all: “Tim.”

The back end of the hallway had opened up wide to an empty, cavernous building. Crates and boxes stood in haphazard, forgotten

stacks. Shadows crawled with insects. It was a warehouse.

The Joker was not as put together as he'd been on the bridge. He was in ragged prison clothes, chains cinched around his neck, his wrists, his feet, and they dragged in a rolling line behind him. His hair stuck up every which way. His grin was ghastly, huge, endlessly amused. In his hand was a rusting crowbar, brown splotches of dried blood staining the end of it.

There wasn't any part of Tim that wasn't afraid of the Joker. There wasn't any part of him that didn't hate the Joker. There wasn't any part of him that intended on moving from his spot between Jason and his murderer.

The Joker gurgled a laugh and hurtled towards them, spinning the crowbar into the air.

There was nowhere for them to go; the rest of the house had been accessible through an opening that was now the warehouse where Jason had been murdered. There were the bedrooms, which Tim knew would be full of more horrors, and at the end of the hall was Bruce's bedroom.

One of the crates exploded, shockingly loud in the silence, smoke billowing and sharp bits of wood flying. Tim's ears rang. This shocked Jason into action, apparently, because Tim felt him seize his arm and drag him away from the Joker, who was still cackling maniacally.

"We can't—" Tim started, about to tell Jason that there was only one direction to go, but Jason only said, "I know."

They weren't going to fight. If this had been real, they would have chosen differently—Bats do not back down from a fight—but with more explosions sounding behind them and an inhuman, most likely unkillable Joker bearing down on them, they ran to Bruce's double doors.

Smoke filled the hallway. Jason grabbed one of the doors, twisted the knob.

It wouldn't move.

Tim's heart stopped.

Locked. Of course it was. Of *course* it was.

Jason looked at Tim. The smoke was black and heavy, obscuring even the oncoming Joker. Nothing could obscure his laugh, though.

“Dick’s,” Tim managed, coughing a little. “Then Damian’s, if it won’t open.”

Jason grabbed Tim’s arm, and they lurched to Dick’s bedroom door, only knowing where it was by memory alone.

Please please open please open

These *fucking* keys. Tim was never locking a door again, thieves and burglars and security be damned.

The door, blessedly, opened. They tumbled inside and slammed the door, the laughter on their heels.

Tim turned around.

“Well,” he said, voice devoid of emotion, “at least the Labyrinth keeps to theme.”

Jason let out a tired string of curses. For a minute, both of them just leaned against the door, looking.

The minotaur, in his giant stone cavern, lifted itself to its feet, eyes molten. Around its neck, par the course, was a key.

They stared at it for a few minutes. It couldn’t have been incredibly reliant on those great big glowing eyes, because it didn’t charge them right away—it just stood there, great head swaying back and forth, growling low in its throat.

“So,” Jason said.

“Poisonous smoke breath,” Tim remembered grimly, “skin like iron. Really big. Horns. Fast.”

Jason said, “Thanks, Captain Obvious.”

“Yep.”

“So,” Jason said again.

“We could do what we did last time,” Tim suggested.

Jason glanced over at him. “You ripped your stitches,” he said, voice

nearly gentle.

Tim, who had been feeling blood leaking through his bandages for the last ten minutes, said, “Thanks, Captain Obvious.”

“My left arm is basically out of commission,” Jason said, factually.

“So,” Tim said.

The minotaur’s nostrils flared. Its maw opened, and lightning flickered, smoke sizzling. It heaved itself forward a little, muscles bunching.

“Guess this is it,” Jason observed.

Tim was too tired to feel anything other than tired. He just said, “Been real, chief.”

There was a pause while Jason got himself together, and then he grumbled, “Say something cooler than that. Your last words can’t be *been real, chief.”*

Tim’s voice was quiet. “And who’s gonna know, huh. It’s not like they’re going to be on my tombstone.”

“*I’ll* know.”

“Well, come up with something cooler for me, Shakespeare.” It was all inadequate, all of it. Bats were more about sharp quips than poignant last words. There were lots of things Tim could have said, like the fact that he could have cried with relief that they were going to die together instead of alone in this nightmarish place. That he was sorry they weren’t going to get to go out and be real brothers.

Tim reached out and snaked a hand around Jason’s right arm and held on.

Jason glanced over at him. Nodded a little, nearly to himself. “They’ll be okay. Right?”

Tim thought about his family.

He said, “Yeah,” because he had to. He couldn’t think about it.

Jason reached up, ruffled Tim’s hair a little. “Okay,” he said. Inadequate.

Tim said, “On three? Old plan. I’ll be the distraction.”

Jason’s face was so wildly upset for one moment that Tim almost lost his own nerve.

Tim said, “You’re not such a shithead after all, you know?”

Jason looked at him. “Really. I am.” He pulled out a knife.

“Finally admitting you’re the worst *would* be the last thing you ever say,” Tim said.

“Fuck off,” Jason said, reflexively.

Fuck off, as last words, sounded much more on brand for Jason, but Tim didn’t get to tell him so because the minotaur charged them, .

Tim lunged right, Jason lunged left. Tim thought that maybe the big dumb monster would catch on to the trick, as it was the same rudimentary one they’d pulled not even two weeks ago, but it didn’t: its horns rammed into the wall with the same tremendous crash, dust raining down from the ceiling on impact.

Tim sprang up out of his roll and nearly fell again. He knew what bad felt like, and this was bad—the combination of the pain from his stab wound, the frayed adrenaline, the cold, just how tired he was. Ten days—eleven?—was a long time to go without any real breaks, and it was slamming into him all at once.

The minotaur shook its huge head, then opened its mouth, smoke pouring out in a sizzling river. In an afterthought, it backhanded Tim across the room, then lumbered around to Jason next.

Time went a little fuzzy for Tim for a second; the side of his head struck something sharp and hard; by the time he lifted his head, an uncomfortable stream of blood trickling down his cheek, the room was half obscured by noxious smoke. Jason nowhere in sight. The minotaur’s horns jutted out of the smoke every so often, and from the sounds of the minotaur’s fury, it hadn’t caught Jason yet.

“You bitch,” muttered Tim, clenching his jaw against this new source of pain, “I said *I* was gonna be the distraction.”

Then he startled a little, a swear word slipping between his teeth.

“Tim?” Jason said, from somewhere in the room.

Tim stared. The little girl—she'd been on the stairs in his childhood home, why was he only just now remembering this—stared back. She was kneeling next to him, small palms pressed flat to the stones in front of her, and she looked remarkably like Rhea except for those wide, solemn eyes: where Rhea's were pale and gray, hers were dark, almost black.

"Um," said Tim, when she kept just looking at him, "Hello? Listen, if you're another ghost, can we hold this for a second? I'm a little busy." He probed at the side of his head, feeling the laceration behind his ear. It stung like a bitch, and it would definitely bruise, but it wasn't a concussion. Probably. Damn uneven stone ground.

The girl tipped her head to the side. She wasn't older than seven or eight, but she had a strange gravity to her, an odd, complete stillness that other children didn't have.

There was the very specific noise of a minotaur hitting a wall.

Jason's voice again, annoyed this time: "*Tim.*"

Tim said, "Are you her daughter?"

At the same time, the little girl said, "You don't have to fight it." Her voice was as strangely accented as Rhea's.

Tim's eyes narrowed. "Shouldn't you be helping Rhea win?" he asked, instead of pressing for more information.

Her small face didn't change. She just regarded him closely, like he was an insect she wanted to memorize before squishing. "You don't have to fight it," she said. "Everyone makes the same mistake. They fight. It is a trick. Just like everything else here."

"Right," Tim said. "We don't have to fight the giant monster with the key we need around its neck. That monster, that we don't have to fight."

"Listen, Red Robin," said Jason's voice, incensed.

"Everything here is old and tired," said the little girl insistently. "Fights are old. It does not attack unless you do."

"We didn't attack it," said Tim. "It charged *us* ."

The little girl stared at him. "Weapons are a sign of attack."

“Weapons are . . . ” Tim trailed off.

The minotaur had charged them . . .*after* Jason had pulled out a knife.

Tim stared at her. “Why are you telling me this?”

The girl lifted one shoulder up and down in an unselfconscious shrug. “I want my mother,” she said.

If they won, Tim remembered, Rhea would have to stay here. He sifted through the morals and ethics of the little girl’s statement and found that he didn’t care.

“Timothy Drake, I swear to God—”

Tim yelled back, “Sheath your knife, Jason.”

There was a pause that the minotaur filled by roaring angrily. The smoke was beginning to sting Tim’s eyes.

Jason appeared and snapped, “What! That is a terrible fucking—who the fuck is that?”

“Just do it!”

Jason glared viciously at Tim. The minotaur hurled through the smoke behind him, roaring loud enough to shake the whole room. Jason darted away, moving to the other side of the room. His movements were slower than they usually were, left arm tucked close to his side.

“Okay, master strategist,” said Jason, but he sheathed his knife, hissing, “I swear to God, what do they pay you for— *sheath my knife*— that’s a *great* fucking idea, why don’t I just jump in the minotaur’s mouth while I’m at it—”

Then he stopped, staring narrowly at the minotaur.

The minotaur stared back, heaving, growling. It did not charge. After a minute, the lightning sizzling in its mouth quieted. It sat back, and was still.

“That’s why they pay me the big bucks,” Tim said, for the reward of seeing Jason scowl at him. He climbed to his feet, favoring his stabbed side. He side-eyed the little girl and inched away from her, waiting for her to spring at him or turn into a man-eating cockroach or grow six rows of teeth.

She did none of those things. She padded over to the minotaur, feet bare and small.

Jason appeared next to Tim, holding his left arm. His face was pale under the dust and dirt. He said, watching the little girl, "Thanks for the backup. The hell happened to your head?"

"I was working a different angle," Tim said. He nudged his shoulder against Jason's by way of apology. "And it got me on a down swing."

"And you didn't dodge?"

"I was busy."

"Busy getting your ass kicked."

"Shut up."

The little girl reached the minotaur. She looked comically small next to it. Tim had a moment of unease where he imagined the minotaur simply stepping on her.

The minotaur's eyes lost their molten glow. The little girl reached up, and the enormous head lowered. Its horns were as big around as Tim's torso.

The little girl tugged on the chord, and it came off simple as you please, snaking down in a pile into her small hands. The minotaur didn't skewer her, and she didn't turn into a horrifying little monster.

When she turned back to them, Jason and Tim still tensed, flinching back as one.

She walked over and held out her small hand, the key glinting in her palm.

It was too easy. It was the only option. She was going to eat them, she was going to snap someone's hand off—

Jason snatched it from her hand.

Nothing happened. She tucked her small hands together, folding them like a dove's wings.

As one, both Tim and Jason went for the door, looking over their shoulders periodically. The little girl did not move, watching them gravely. The minotaur had turned away, lumbering away to wherever

it was when people weren't bothering it.

There was nothing in the hallway. No smoke, no bombs. It was just the corpse of Wayne Manor, silent and decaying.

Jason hesitated at Bruce's door, staring at it, shoulders curled and defeated. Tim waited him out.

After a moment, without speaking, Jason handed Tim the key.

Tim didn't want to open the door, either. Tim did not want a twisted, wrong version of their father to be behind that door. He wasn't sure he could bear it. He had had enough. He was tired. He didn't want to do it anymore.

But Jason needed Tim to do it, so Tim did it.

He fit the key in the lock, turned it, and opened the door.

There was no fanfare. There was no earthquake. But Tim knew instantly that this was the end.

They stepped through.

It was not Bruce's bedroom. It was a dark, vast cavern, walls and ceilings very far away. It was startling, being thrown into the open like that when you'd just come from a dank, decrepit hallway. Blue stone gleamed faintly. Shadows hung thick. It smelled like earth and rain. The room felt very old, and very slow.

For the first time, Tim *felt* the Labyrinth properly. Felt like a small creature inside a monster's stomach, deep inside its belly.

They moved properly into the room. Tim felt his own wariness radiating off Jason, tension in every line of both of their bodies.

A barely perceptible rumble passed through the cavern: a huge throat humming, or a huge body shifting.

There was another door standing by itself next to their door, doorknobless. It threw Tim back down the circle of time: ten days and some change ago, they had stood in front of two doors just like this, being asked to choose one to go through.

In the middle of the cavern was a tall, shining mirror.

—

Markos stood in his hotel room and looked through the mirror, taking a deep breath. He could see the cave, feel the Labyrinth calling him back: a dreaded, familiar beckoning.

The twin doors stood closed opposite his window into the Labyrinth. In front of the mirror, he could see the glowing, threadlike line circling it—guarding it. One in, one out. The thread would not let any other end come to pass.

That was how it worked. That was how it always worked. Except now, he and his beloved had bought their salvation at the price of two boys. Two sons. Two brothers. Rhea would open the left door, would pass over the phosphorescent line, and the doors would vanish, and the mirror would vanish for seven more years.

When it appeared again, they would send someone else through. He would go in with their newest sacrifice. The endless cycle would begin anew: that old song with the same ending.

He hadn't heard from Rhea in a few days, which was odd, but not alarming. He knew she was alive—the Labyrinth was their punishment, not their execution, however much they might wish it so.

Markos fastidiously straightened his cufflinks. He did not think about the door disappearing, and the boys trapped forever in their own hell. He rather hoped they got to die together. Since they hadn't killed each other, he was forced to assume they had developed some kind of mutual understanding, some kind of camaraderie. He knew their lives. It wasn't completely improbable.

Still. Something felt. . . different, about the Labyrinth. He wasn't in it, so he couldn't have pinpointed it precisely, but he could tell. Something was moving differently. The heartbeat had changed tempo.

He heard a door opening and looked up, pulling his jacket straight.

The left door did not open.

The right door opened.

The *right door opened*, and two boys stepped out.

Markos could only watched, shocked into absolute silence. His hands fell to his sides, slacked and open.

Rhea had lost.

Rhea had lost.

They looked—like they had been through the Labyrinth, really. They were covered in grime and human despair, eyes hunted, bloodstained and filthy.

The light fell on them as they drew closer. They were moving the same: slow and wary, eyes quick, bodies ready for violence. Hostility radiated off the older one, dark and vicious, eyes nearly luminescent in the half-light. The shorter one, the younger one, looked around with narrowed intensity, shoulders curled in with exhaustion. His fists still looked like they had fight in them.

They matched each other step for step. Movement for movement. A fascinating knowledge, one they had not known the last time Markos had seen them. If Markos hadn't been so wildly disturbed, he would have found it fascinating. Their movements very clearly said that they were not interested in going anywhere without the other.

Timothy Drake's eyes fell on Markos in the mirror, and their eyes locked.

With deadly calm, the boy said, "You bastard."

Jason Todd gave Markos a look that would have flayed the skin off a lesser man. As rage tightened his face, a savage power seemed to fill him with a new energy until the hunted look in his shoulders disappeared entirely. He was no longer prey, but predator.

The story was different. Markos did not know the lyrics. He did not know what to do now.

The line between him and the two boys shimmered pointedly.

"That's the finish line, I guess," said Jason Todd, voice steely and supercilious.

"Well," said Markos, and then he knew. He looked at the line and saw that the story was still a tragedy.

He knew the song after all.

The left door opened, and, as lovely and inexorable as the dawn, his Rhea walked out.

She was not nearly as surprised as he was. She looked different.

“Beloved,” she said to him. The doors behind her vanished.

Timothy and Jason looked back at her, and she looked at them.

For a moment, nobody said anything. Rhea and Markos regarded the boys. The boys regarded them back, an unbreakable pair. An *us* and a *them.*

Unfortunate. He wondered if it would hold.

Timothy Drake said, “So what now? We won. We can go home.”

He said it with such an iron knowledge in his voice. No one had told him such, but he knew. They were the victors.

Rhea looked at Markos.

Markos said, “One of you can.”

There was a second of deadly silence. The rage snuffed out of Jason Todd’s expression as quickly as it had come, and Timothy Drake’s expression went completely, eerily blank.

Jason Todd said, “What?”

Markos elaborated, voice expressionless. “There can only be one winner.”

Nothing happened for another long moment. Neither boy stirred.

Then, in a rush of movement so swift Markos missed how it began, the two began to grapple with each other, all soft gasps and grunts.

Markos was beginning to feel the cynical coolness descend over him—what was brotherhood to a chance at life, he thought, sneering a little—when he realized that they were not fighting to win. Timothy Drake was fighting to get *away* from the slender, twinkling line, and Jason Todd was fighting to push him over it.

It didn’t matter how nimble, how swift the first was. One was simply stronger than the other. The fight was over quickly; the younger was injured, weaker.

“No,” Timothy Drake said at last, and it was thin, and high—the sound of someone who knew when he was beaten. The next was a cry

of despair: "*No!"*

Todd wrestled with Drake for a moment, wrangling him close. "Shhh," he said, short and gruff. "Shh. Listen to me. *Listen,* you little asshole."

"No—God, let go of me, *don't—you promised*— stop it, stop it. *Stop it!"*

Rhea actually fell back a step, and Markos felt the same impulse to flee, to look away from what was happening. Shock radiated through him, and the tragedy struck him as it had never had before: the wild grief he was witnessing in real time singed him.

"*Listen* to me." Jason Todd shook him a little, held him. "Listen to me. Listen. You need to tell—I want you to tell them—"

Todd was met with a renewed effort, a new burst of desperate energy. Drake was nearly shrieking as he fought, and Markos was reminded that the boy was just that: only a boy. "*No,* you bastard, let me *go,* I swear to God, no—" He stopped shouting, because he was crying.

The boy was subdued once more.

Todd said, "Tim, *please.* Please, Tim."

Drake jerked once more and was still. Todd had him from behind, Drake's chest against Todd's back. Todd's arms wrapped around him, trapping Drake's arms, holding him fast, Todd's face right beside Drake's.

A tear dripped off Drake's chin. His eyes were shut tight, face twisted.

Markos felt sick.

"Listen to me," said Todd again, and it was an attempt at a snarl, but he didn't quite manage it all the way. "Tim. You've got to tell them—you've got to tell Dad that I'm sorry."

Drake made one single sound: a low sob, strangled at once.

Todd was speaking faster. "Tell him I'm so sorry for all of it—and tell him—tell Dick—"

He had to stop, breath shuddering. Drake was still crying, but now he was doing it without making a sound. It was in every line of his face.

"Oh, they know," Todd muttered abruptly. He tucked Tim closer. For

a second, Todd just held him.

“I always wanted a little brother, you know,” Todd told him. “Sorry it took me so long.”

Drake nodded once, twice. They really could have been brothers, Markos thought. They really could have been, the way that they looked, with the dark hair, the flinty eyes, the fierce, encompassing way they loved. He thought of Bruce Wayne, who loved his sons. Bruce Wayne, who would get one of his sons back. Who would lose another for the second time.

He felt the urge, again, to look away. This grief was monstrous, and he could not bear to see it.

Drake’s knees buckled suddenly, and his head dropped forward, body going limp. His hands slacked, the fight going out of him. It startled Todd, who lowered him down at once. “Tim? *Tim.”*

Tim’s knees hit the ground, and as soon as they did, his body tensed, twisted, rolled.

In a single second, in one swift, uncompromising motion, Drake rolled Todd over him, shoving him away in a startling display of iron strength. Todd, who had relaxed his grip when Drake had appeared to lose consciousness, never recovered.

By the time Jason Todd sat up, regained his balance, he was over the line.

Drake stared at him.

“Tell them yourself,” he said, mouth tilting up in a gentle half-smile.

Todd began to cry out, but it was already too late; the song had already been finished; the end had been spun out.

The silvery film that Markos knew so well had already leapt up into the air between them. There was a moment where Todd was there, reaching back to Drake, and then Todd was not there anymore.

The minute Todd disappeared, Drake’s shoulders dropped, as though a pair of strings had been holding him up. The dark head bent; the strength vanished; despair bowed him. The hard resolve, though, did not fail him now; Drake did not make a sound. Tears dripped from his chin, but still, there was no sound.

Markos stared wordlessly at Rhea.

And for the first time in what had to be centuries, he saw tears fall from Rhea's eyes.

—

The mirror spit Jason back into one of his own safehouses.

He stood, staggered. His own possessions stared back at him, neat and undisturbed by his ten-day absence. There was nothing but the sound of his own animalistic breathing, getting louder and more ragged all the time.

The mirror yielded nothing but his own wild, barely recognizable reflection. There was nothing to even hint at the fact that he had just been in a completely different realm with Tim beside him, and now he was back on his own earth, and Tim was not there.

Jason broke everything he could reach. The mirror was the first to go, then the cabinet doors. The dishes. The picture frames. There were holes in the wall before he even registered his fist was moving.

After several feral, desolate minutes, he had nothing left in him, and he collapsed against the kitchen counter, slid to the floor. There, he cried until he fell asleep.

Chapter 12

Tim didn't know how long he sat there on his knees, palms flat to the ground, soundless shudders passing through him. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he wondered how long it was going to take him to die.

He almost didn't mind, though, because he knew Jason was out. The mirror had flashed, turning momentarily into one of Jason's safehouses—the one on 54th, he had broken in there once—so Jason really was out there, back in Gotham.

What he minded was being alone, here, in this—

He was never getting out. This was where he was going to die, by himself, *digested*—

Markos said, "Well, beloved. Come here and take your place in the sun."

His voice was tired.

Tim lifted his head.

Markos had stepped through the mirror. He was standing in the place where Jason had disappeared, between the mirror and the phosphorescent line that circled the mirror.

Out of dull curiosity, Tim reached out and tried to put a hand over the line.

It simply didn't let him. His hand flattened on an invisible surface, as though there was some strange, smooth window between him and the way out. It made sense, really. There had to be something to keep people in.

Tim swung his head around, feeling another trickle of blood slide down the side of his face. If he was lucky, he would just bleed out. Maybe he could go find his ghost mother again, and she would kill him gently and lovingly, with a rotten floor that dropped off into an abyss.

He looked at Rhea, who was staring at him with a strangely disturbed expression, eyes wet.

Tim was genuinely surprised she wasn't insane. He would be, if he were here for so long.

Markos said, "Rhea, what—" His words cut off suddenly, and he inhaled, sharp and shocked.

Tim looked back at Rhea.

The little girl was standing next to Rhea, snuggled up to her side. She watched Markos with those big dark eyes, and then a smile broke out over her face, and she looked like a child again instead of a strange, intent ghost.

She said something to Markos, happy and quick. It was a language Tim didn't know, but when she said a word to him again, Tim saw it. It was remarkable how well the word *Papa* translated across any language in the world. Her eyes were dark because Markos' were dark; she was calling to her father.

He said something to her in a low, wondering tone, kneeling, and she ran up to the barrier, her hands pressed flat to the invisible glass. She was chattering for real now, her words an unending, delighted stream. In the light from the mirror, she was just a little girl.

Markos' expression had opened wonderingly, and he no longer looked plain or bland, kneeling in front of his daughter, a thin line separating them. A deep spike of pained envy stabbed into Tim's chest; he let his head drop, jaw clenched. Every time his brain tried to wrap itself around his situation— *you're alone, you're alone forever, you'll never see them again*— it shied sharply away before grief could sink its claws into him too far.

Rhea came and sat behind the child, wrapping her arms around her. The little girl continued to talk, and the more she talked, the younger she looked, until there was no trace of the solemn little figure that had faced a minotaur. Her face was radiantly happy as she chattered to both of her parents, and Tim wondered, curious even now, how long it had been since she had seen them both.

Markos said something to Rhea, still in that other language. She said something back, her face untroubled. Something like happiness had softened her features.

Markos looked at Tim. Rhea looked at Tim. They looked at each other, and Rhea's arms tightened around the child.

Something glimmered, and Tim glanced around.

A single ray of orange sunlight had broken through somewhere, and it lay on the floor, a bright bar. Another appeared. Then another, until the back of the cavern dissolved, and a wide green valley spread before them between one blink and the next. The sun was setting, orange and bloody, and deep blue clouds lay heavy on the horizon around it. The moon peered between two of them, yellow and hazy. The stars came out all at once.

When Tim looked back, Markos was standing in front of him, still behind that line.

“One has to wonder,” he said, thoughtfully, “if this was always how it was going to end. The inevitable. One has to wonder if *you* showed it this . . . its last deception.”

Tim didn’t say anything.

Markos looked at his wife and daughter. His face was lit from the rays of the sun. He looked out over the wide world of the Labyrinth.

“The green of my valley,” he murmured. “The faces of my loved ones.”

Rhea picked up the little girl. The little girl reached for her father with wide open hands, two small starfish.

Something peaceful and certain stole over Markos’ face. His shoulders relaxed.

Markos looked at Tim. “If not freedom . . . what bliss. I give you your freedom now in return, to go to your family while I go to mine. Go quickly, before it rescinds it.”

And Markos stepped over the line.

It flashed once, twice.

Tim’s hand, which had still been resting on the barrier, fell through.

There was a twisting, vicious sensation, like Tim was being ripped in half and then sewn back together in the same motion, like hurtling through a storm in a teakettle.

After the vertigo finally released him, Tim opened his eyes. The carpet was bristly underneath his hands.

It was a bland, featureless room with two beds, neatly made, an open, empty closet, and a keycard on the nightstand: a hotel room.

He looked around and found the mirror on the wall, wide and tall.

Through the mirror, he could see Markos being embraced by his family. The little girl stared at him with unfathomable dark eyes over Markos' shoulder, her hand pressed flat to Markos' neck.

Then, without any sound at all, the mirror fell to neat pieces on the floor until all that was left was an empty frame. The glittering shards of mirror lay where they had fallen into a heap, innocently reflecting the ceiling.

Nearly without knowing what he was doing, Tim went to the window and wrenched the gauzy curtains back.

It was night. Snow was falling. The view was of more buildings, damp streets, the occasional car blowing past.

He became aware of the fact that the noise he was hearing was himself: his own frantic, wild gasping.

There was a very small part of him, the one still clinging onto the barest hint of sanity, that was shrieking at him that he needed to take a minute. He needed to calm down. He needed to call someone. He needed to see if this was real—

God. If it wasn't real—

He tore out of the hotel room, the heavy door clicking shut behind him. The halls were lit with a dull yellow fluorescence, and he limped down the hideously carpeted hallway until he found the elevators. There was blood on his fingers from where he had touched his head, and it left a smear on the button.

The receptionist was talking to someone on the phone when he reached the lobby, and didn't look up. The lobby was empty other than that, which was good, because God only knew how he looked—

The automatic doors slid out of his way, and Tim staggered out into the night, still nearly hyperventilating. Over the sound of his own blank terror, he could hear the low rumble of cars, the distant wail of sirens, the barely-there buzz of neon lights and heaters. The deathlike hush of the Labyrinth was gone.

The snow kissed his face. The cold tore into his lungs. It felt *so real*—

Tim muttered aloud, "Where the hell am I, where the hell *am* I—"

Street signs. He needed to see the street signs…

He staggered a little on his way to the main road by the hotel. He was still bleeding from multiple places, and his feet felt swollen and numb, but that all felt wildly unimportant at the moment.

The streetlights reflected off the wet pavement in long neon smears. Cars raced past, headlines shining. Ferry Street and 12th Avenue. That didn't help, it could be any street anywhere—

Except it wasn't.

Because next to him, beside the hotel, was a gas station, and across the street was a CVS, and across from *that* was Bertel's Bakery and down the street was Market Tire Services and down the street from that was the Portuguese restaurant with the really good stuffed lobster and—

The world oriented itself around him. Bludhaven. He was in Bludhaven, somewhere between Dick's apartment and Gotham.

It had to have been the middle of the night. Barely any traffic was passing by, and Tim had no bag, no wallet, no phone, and no way to contact anybody. It wasn't *panic* coursing through him, but it wasn't logic, either. His best guess was shock, but his brain kept rabbiting in so many directions that he couldn't nail down what was going on inside of him.

Tim retreated a little, still barely aware of his own movements. He hadn't brought the keycard from the hotel down, which was *so beyond stupid* that he wanted to hit himself, but maybe if…

He was walking down the sidewalk when a sharp breeze blew past him, swift and short, just for an instant. To anyone else, it would have just been that—a stiff breeze—but to a *Bat* who worked with *metas*—

Tim said, "*Hey,"* before he could stop himself.

There was nothing for a long second, and Tim was scrubbing a hand over his face for being an idiot when the wind came again.

"*Tim?"*

Tim's head snapped up, and he winced at the wave of pain that came with the movement.

Wally West said, "Jesus. *Christ.* Tim? Tim, what the hell — is that really you? What the *hell*— "

It should have been an insane miracle that Wally stood in front of him, in civvies, looking truly thrown for a loop, snow catching in his red hair. The fact that *Wally*— who had been in his life nearly as long as the Waynes had—was the one finding him now and not some crazed supervillain should have been the luckiest thing that had ever happened to Tim.

But if it wasn't *real* . . .

Starting towards him, Wally said, "Tim, what in the name of all that is —where have you *been?* Do you even know—" He reached for Tim.

It wasn't Bart, but Tim staggered backwards anyway. " *Don't."*

Wally stopped short, staring. "Don't? *Don't?* Kid, are you—"

Then he seemed to get a good look at Tim, really see him, and the state he was in.

"Jesus," he muttered, looking Tim over, "hell. Okay. Okay. Easy, Tim, okay? It's okay. It's just me. It's just Wally. I'm not gonna hurt you." He held both hands out placatingly, like he was soothing an injured animal.

Tim held both sides of his head, trying to force himself to just *think.* Was it real, wasn't it. It *felt* real, but so had his *mother,* was it too coincidental — but why *Wally,* if that was the case—

"Tim! Tim, hey. Stay with me here. Hey, I'm gonna—I'm gonna call Dick, all right? I'm gonna call Dick and I'll hand the phone to you so you can talk to him, okay?" Still holding one hand out entreatingly to Tim, he pulled out his phone.

Tim took another step backwards—like that would help if Wally attacked him, Wally was a speedster—not-Wally? *Christ,* Tim, *think*—

The Labyrinth wasn't necessarily slow to show its hand, but if this was some new, awful something . . .

"Hey, Dick." Wally's voice was harried. "Yeah, I know I just left, I

know, I know—shut *up* , Dick, *I found Tim*."

There was a slight pause, and then Tim heard Dick's shriek of "*WHAT?"* all the way from where he stood, six feet away from Wally.

There was a burst of racket on the other end, and Wally said, "I'm not an *idiot,* Dick, I would've brought him by now, but he won't let me touch him!"

Another frantic murmur. "I *know,* Dick, I—I don't *know,* he was just *walking down the side of the road*— Because I called you, dipshit! He's freaking out, bad. Dick— he looks bad, okay? He looks really, really bad."

Tim tuned him out. *Think,* you idiot, *think*—

There was something he was missing, something he wasn't getting, and it—

He snapped back to reality when Wally said, "Tim, I'm handing you the phone, okay? It's—here, okay?" His voice was anxious, eyebrows drawn together as he held the phone out to Tim. Wally was still standing apart from Tim, movements carefully slow, the phone comically far away.

Tim stared at it.

Technology.

Their goddamn phones, comms, all of it had disappeared once they'd landed in the Labyrinth. There hadn't been any *technology* inside the Labyrinth.

"Tim," said Wally, shaking the phone a little when Tim didn't move. "You're freaking me out, and you're freaking Dick out. Can you please talk to him?"

Tim snatched it at once, visibly startling Wally. "Dick?"

The well-loved voice came through at once. "Oh, God. Tim? Tim—are you there?"

Tim's whole body shuddered. The wave of relief that crashed over him nearly took him out right there. "*Dick*."

"Oh my *God."* Dick sounded near tears. "Tim, oh my God. Where the hell have you—I don't care. I don't care, Tim, *please* let Wally bring

you to me. I can start driving right now, but it'll take me at least forty minutes to get to you—Tim—"

Tim's head swam, and the world grew distant. He collapsed to his knees. Wally flashed forward to catch him before he could hit the pavement too hard, kneeling in front of Tim, holding his arms.

"Come on, buddy," mumbled Wally, in a way that was so Bart-like that Tim's chest hurt. "Just let me—"

"Okay," Tim said, to the phone and to Wally, exhausted. "Okay."

Wally snatched him up nearly before Tim finished.

Tim lost track of what happened for a second—worse than he usually did when being carried by a speedster, anyway. He thought he might have blacked out a little, his hands going numb, the world going dark around the edges. His head lolled back, and he knew it did in a strange, distant way, but he couldn't stop it.

Then Wally was shaking him a little as they walked, pulling his shoulders up. They had slowed to normal speed. "Tim. Hey. Come on, man, stay with me. You're gonna freak Dick out more than he already is."

It wasn't only Dick. Tim could hear it in Wally's voice that he was scaring him, too; he was just trying not to show it. How long had he really been gone, anyway—

Tim pulled his head back up with effort and winced at the bright lights, winced at the ugly pull in his side. They were in an apartment complex, and Wally was taking the stairs two at a time, Tim cradled easily in his arms. Tim's insides whited out, rushed back, went out; he knew where they *were—Dick* was here, Tim was really going to see him again, the real him, not some fucked up version of him—

The relief was there, and it was threatening to take him all the way out, but the deadened horror wouldn't go away, either. It was eating Tim alive. *God,* Dick was here. He needed to find *Jason*—

Wally's voice broke through. "Come on. Almost there."

Wally kicked at number 17. It flew open nearly before his foot made contact, and outlined in a halo of light in the doorway was Tim's older brother.

“Give him to me. *Give* him to me—”

Tim only had the energy to reach out an arm, wrap it around Dick’s shoulders; he was transferred from one pair of arms to the other in an instant, carried into the apartment, where warmth began to push the cold from his skin at once. It was Dick and no one else, solid and warm and shaking, and Tim could have wept for honest to God days. He did, just a little, gasping against Dick’s neck while Dick held him so tight it was a whole new pain, but he didn’t care; if Dick let go he would fly apart into a thousand pieces.

Dick set Tim on his couch without releasing one part of him, clutching Tim to his chest, one hand cradling Tim’s head. Tim wrapped both of his arms around his brother and held on for his life.

“It’s okay,” Dick said into Tim’s ear, breathing fast, rocking him a little. Tim heard the tears in his voice. “It’s okay, it’s okay, I’ve got you. Jesus, you’re frozen. I’ve got you.”

Tim didn’t have any part of himself together enough to answer, but Dick didn’t seem to need him to. There was a long silence while Dick held him, and Tim held him back.

Dick rallied sooner than Tim did. He began snapping hectic questions at Wally, and Tim felt a brief flash of pity for Wally because he could only answer “Dick I *don’t know”* and “DICK I DON’T KNOW,” and “He was *wandering down the side of the road,* man, that’s it, that’s all I’ve got for you. ”

Tim didn’t want to talk. He wanted to sit here and go to sleep and possibly not wake up for twenty years. He wanted to sit here and let Dick hold him and not say anything at all. He felt like a used-up rag, tired down to his bones, and he wanted to turn his brain off so bad he could have screamed.

Dick let Tim go enough to pull back and examine him. His face was white, expression seized between anxiety and wild joy. He cupped Tim’s face between his hands and said, “Damn, you look awful.”

Tim managed a little smile. “Good to see you, too.” His voice was a raw croak.

Dick’s little smile in return didn’t reach his eyes. He pushed out a long breath, visibly got himself under control, and began to look Tim over.

“Wally,” he said, “There’s a container on the top shelf of the medicine

cupboard labeled with Tim's name, it's got his antibiotics—"

Wally was back in an instant. Water was pushed into Tim's hands, and Tim swallowed several pills, downed all the water.

"It was a different dimension," Tim told them, because something needed to be said about it.

Dick's mouth curled into a dark, unhappy line, and there were more questions in his eyes, but all he did was remark, "Well, at least the world's greatest detectives weren't fooled by nothing."

Dick pulled Tim's head to the side and probed at the cut there. Tim hissed, jerking a little.

"Wally, can you—" There was a rush of air. Wally held out the first-aid kit. "Yep. Thanks."

Wally said, "Not to distract you, but he's sort of . . . got some blood underneath his jacket, too—"

Dick pushed Tim until Tim was lying flat on his back on the couch, and the movement hurt him so bad that he had to gasp and clutch his side while the wave of pain rolled over him in a nauseating wave. God, he was going to bleed all over this couch. Dick held his forearms through it, watching him anxiously.

When Tim had quieted, Dick moved his jacket out of his way, gently pried Tim's fingers off, and allowed himself a single muttered swear word. "Tim—"

"It was stitched," Tim told him, raggedly. "Ripped 'em. Knife wound, not real deep."

The next few questions were short; Dick seemed to see that Tim didn't have a lot in him, which Tim was distantly grateful for. Was the knife wound cleaned? *Yes.* When was the last time it was cleaned? *Don't know, not more than two days.* Are you injured anywhere else? *Bruised everywhere. Burned some places, nothing bad.*

As Dick talked, he examined, cleaned, restitched, warmed. Wally whizzed in and out with towels, disinfectants, topical anesthetics. The bloody jacket was removed, as were his shoes and socks, and heating pads shoved in blankets over his feet. Tim couldn't do anything but lay there and breathe, trying not to lose it completely. There was a minute where Tim felt all the fight in him go out like a guttering

candle for the first time in days and days and days, his body giving up after being pushed to the limit, and the panic left him gasping for breath, twitching and shaking—Dick sat at his hip and held his shoulders and soothed him through it, matching their breathing. It took long minutes for him to settle down again, for Dick to start cleaning his head wound.

It all blended together in a blur after a few minutes, punctuated by Dick's low commands to Wally and Wally's quiet remarks in return. The pain receded into background noise, lulling Tim into half-sleep, the heaviness pulling him under. Dick let it happen, and after what felt like hours but was probably only most of one Dick was shifting him, moving bloodied rags and bandages into a trash bag, covering Tim with more blankets.

He was mostly asleep when Wally left.

". . . tell your dad," Tim caught, somewhere in his sleep haze.

". . . call in a minute. I'm scared to ask about Jason—"

"Don't worry about that now, okay?" It was Dick being soothed now, Wally doing the soothing. "One thing at a time. Tim's here. He's gonna be fine. It's okay, all right?" There was rustling—a hug, most likely. "It's okay." Wally's voice was a little muffled. "Want me to stay?"

"No." Dick's voice was muffled, too. "I can't let him sleep for long, I'm worried about a concussion. God. His *eyes*. . . he was walking down the side of the *road?"*

"Just walking. Nearly missed him because I didn't recognize him, he had to yell at me. Jesus, though, after. . . it was like he thought I was going to. . . I don't know, like *attack* him or something."

"I can't even imagine. . . "

"Well, *stop* imagining then."

There was a quiet, reluctant huff of laughter. More murmuring that Tim lost as he slid towards real sleep. He had no idea how long it was before something woke him again, pulling him up through to the realm of consciousness.

"Sorry," Dick murmured, stroking his hair back from his forehead. He'd dragged one of the armchairs over to sit by Tim's head. Only a lamp illuminated them, and further off, the kitchen light was on. "My

phone."

"Mmm," Tim muttered, only sort of awake. The heaviness was dragging him back down. Dick nudged him.

"Tim, I'm worried about a concussion—" he broke off, staring at his phone, eyebrows furrowed. The bright light made strange planes of his face. Putting it to his ear, he said, "Hello?"

The answer was a long time coming, but when it did, Dick's entire body tensed. "*Jason?* Jay. Slow down, I don't understand. What do you—"

Tim was up in an instant, groaning a little at the pain in his side. "Give me that," he said.

"*Tim,"* said Dick, grabbing at his shoulder. "Stay down, I don't know —"

Dick was close enough that Tim heard Jason say "*WHAT did you just say?"*

Tim snatched the phone. Because he had to make light of it, he had to, because if he didn't he knew they'd both break apart, he said, "Stop freaking out. It's me."

There was a dead, absolute silence from the other end. If Tim hadn't heard Jason breathing, he would have assumed Jason had hung up.

Then, "I'm going to kill you," which maybe would have had more weight if it hadn't sounded so rigid and automatic. There was something underneath that suggested that Jason was about to lose it.

"I know." Tim was breathing fast. "I know, okay? I'm sorry."

"Don't you *dare*— I can't *believe* you—" Tim could hear the sobs that kept rising, heard how Jason wrenched them back down. "You absolute little *shit* —you're. . . you're here? Are you out?"

"Yes. Yeah. Don't ask, I don't know." Dick, to his credit, was letting Tim talk, but he was clutching onto the blankets near Tim's knees, eyes guarded and tense.

"If that was another fucking *trick—"* It was an attempt at a snarl, but there was something wild and awful still threading through Jason's voice. Something stabbed through Tim's chest; he'd been here,

comforted, taken care of, and Jason was *alone* in a goddamn empty safehouse, thinking that he'd just let his little brother die in the most horrific way possible. Tim *sucked.*

"It wasn't. It wasn't. That little girl—she came back, and Markos wanted to be with them. I don't know. A life for a life, or something. I'll work it all out later. Jason, listen. Listen to me. I want you to call Bruce."

Dick and Jason both said, "What?"

Tim pressed on. "Call Bruce. Or *I'll* call him and tell him to go get you. It's up to you."

There was a long silence. Finally, Jason said, "You. Are the fucking worst, you know that? You're the worst. I know what you're fucking doing. I know it, okay? You little shit. You can't just have your cake and eat it too. I may have admitted to liking you *once,* but that doesn't mean— we're not just going to play happy family just because *you* want it, personally, you are the *worst,* my God. You selfish bastard."

He sounded haunted, sick.

Tim said, "You promised. You *promised."*

Another silence. Tim could tell by his breathing that he was crying. Jason said, "Christ, I hate you."

"Please just do it, Jay," Tim begged quietly, one more time. If Jason told him to screw it again Tim was going to cave and call someone else, or make Dick drive them down there himself. But he knew Jason wanted it, wanted it so desperately, and Jason wouldn't take it unless someone made him.

There was a long silence. Tim twisted his hands into the blankets until his knuckles were white.

Finally, sounding tired to the bone, Jason said, "I swear if you didn't tell Dick you were stabbed I'm throwing you off a roof."

"I'm good," Tim told him, knowing that was what he was after. "I'm fine." Hesitantly, he said, almost too afraid to press his advantage: "I'll. . . see you at the Manor, right?"

Another long pause.

At last, exhausted, “Yeah, kid. Wear a guy down. Jesus. Only because I need to wring your neck for that dumb motherfucking stunt you pulled. God. Mother of God.”

Tim’s shoulders collapsed in relief. Slumping back down onto the pillows, he said, “Well, everybody knows I’m better than you, anyway.”

He was rewarded with a short huff. “Keep dreaming.”

“Call him.”

Wearily, Jason warned, “I can’t guarantee it’ll go well.”

“It’ll be fine,” Tim said. “It’ll be fine. And we get to sleep in beds tonight.”

“Oh, thank God,” muttered Jason. “I’ve aged sixty years in less than two weeks. My feet will never be the same.”

Tim let out a long breath.

Jason said, “We made it.”

“Yeah,” Tim said. “We did.”

They both sat there for a minute, unwinding. After a long minute, Tim handed the phone back to Dick.

Dick took it, eyeing Tim like Tim had just grown a second head. Hesitantly, Dick said, “Hey, little wing. Where are you?”

Jason answered, talked for a second. Dick said quietly, “I’m just glad you’re okay. It’s good to hear your voice.” Jason said something else, and Dick’s face turned bemused, gaze flashing to Tim. “No, he’s fine, mostly. I stitched him back up. We’ll need to do some tests when we get back to the Manor—no, we’re at my apartment. Wally found him.”

Jason said something back, and Dick’s voice became Soothing Older Brother I’ve-Got-This voice. That voice sucked because it worked every time. “It’ll be all right. Bruce always wants to see you. Don’t think I didn’t hear Tim extract that promise, and I’ll hold you to it.”

He stood up, glanced at Tim, who waved him off. Jason needed somebody to pull him off whatever ledge he was on, and Tim felt too unraveled himself to do more than he had done already.

Dick walked into the kitchen, and Tim heard the low murmur as he talked to Jason.

“Hang on,” he heard Dick say, and Dick walked back to the living room. “Tim, I know you’re tired—”

“No, I know,” Tim grumbled, but in truth, he felt too jittery to sleep now. The part that kept telling him that none of this was real had found its strength again, and tired anxiety was pulsing its slow way through him. “I’ll shower.”

“Waterproof bandages are in the first-aid kit. Plastic wrap is in the drawer by the dishwasher.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know the drill,” Tim muttered, slowly sitting up. A dull wave of pain rolled over him, and he clenched his teeth.

Dick put a hand on his shoulder without Tim noticing him move. The phone was still at his ear. Eyeing him worriedly, Dick said, “You good?”

Tim settled for, “Ask me after my shower.”

Jason said something, and Dick said affectionately to the phone, “I’ve known that about him longer than you, dumb-dumb. He says, ‘don’t do anything stupid like pretend you’re not hurt when you are.’”

Jason said something else, and Dick rolled his eyes. “Okay, what he actually said was, ‘don’t be a fucking idiot and play at being fine when you’re not, you absolute moron.’ I was paraphrasing because I thought that was rude.”

Tim snorted. The banter grounded him a little. Standing up, he waved Dick off again and wandered off to waterproof his injuries.

The shower was very needed, but short; Tim couldn’t bear to put weight on his feet for very long, and while the hot water chased the cold from his skin, it made his feet feel worse. Hobbling out of the shower, he undid the plastic wrap from around his waist and pulled off the waterproof bandage around his ear. He didn’t look in the mirror, pulling on the borrowed sweatpants and sweatshirt.

When he hobbled slowly out, he found Dick leaning against the wall beside the bathroom, pulling anxiously on the hem of his T-shirt.

“Hey,” Tim said.

“Hey,” Dick said, scanning him. “How…are you?”

It was all jumbled in his head, playing in and out, a skipped and scratched record. Tim just shook his head wearily. “I don’t. . . wanna talk about it,” he said, haltingly. “Later. It’s. . . I can’t right now.”

“Okay,” said Dick. Anxiety made his eyes dark, the circles under his eyes standing out, but he had the look of someone who wasn’t planning on sleeping anytime soon. “Okay,” he said again, and then he shifted and Tim let Dick fold over him protectively.

Dick said, “I was so worried—God. We didn’t hear anything, and I thought—I started to think—”

“I’m good,” said Tim into Dick’s shoulder, to spare him saying it. “Just. Tired.”

It was an understatement; he felt battered into pieces. But he didn’t say that, because Dick didn’t need to hear it, and after all, it would be worse when he had to tell the story.

Dick seemed to hear it anyway and held him tighter, like he could put Tim back together with his own hands.

“We should . . . did anybody call B?” Tim said. He wanted Bruce. He would wait, though, until after Bruce got Jason, because Jason needed Bruce more. But he knew Bruce would be worried.

“He was getting off patrol. I called him in a three-way with Jason,” Dick said, rubbing Tim’s back. “Told him I was bringing you home, then hung up after Jason started talking. Jason. . . needed some encouragement to call.”

Which was just typical. Dick Grayson was nothing if not excellent at being other people’s courage.

Tim pulled back. Without properly meeting Dick’s eyes because his throat was burning, Tim said, “I’m . . . you’re . . . I’m just so happy to see you.”

Dick kissed his forehead, swiped a thumb under Tim’s eyes. “Oh, baby bird,” he murmured. “God, I’m so glad you’re all right. Come on. You can sleep on the way, okay?”

“Okay.”

Dick bundled up a blanket to bring for Tim, then looked back. “So. I won’t get into it. But you and Jason. . . ”

Tim huffed a little laugh. It was funny, in a terrible, awe-inspiring way. “We’re good.” Inadequate, but it wasn’t wrong.

Dick nodded. “I figured. . . well. I’ll have to hear about it later. But he was really worried about you.”

Tim checked, “You heard him start to talk to Bruce, right.”

“Oh, B heard him, all right. You really did get him to promise that, didn’t you? How?”

Tim just took the blanket. The creeping exhaustion was pulling at him, and the war between it and his deadened anxiety threatened to pull him down to the ground to curl up into a ball.

“Fair enough,” Dick allowed, wrapping an arm around Tim as he took up his car keys. “Come on.”

—

The wait between the phone call and the opening of Jason’s safehouse door was the longest of Jason’s life, and only the knowledge that he was genuinely too exhausted to find a way to Wayne Manor by himself kept him from slipping out the back and finding somewhere else to hide. He had to go lay eyes on Tim himself—the little fucker. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Dick with Tim—the opposite, Jason knew firsthand how much Dick loved Tim—but he had to know. He wanted to fling Tim off the roof for that goddamn move he’d pulled in the Labyrinth. That stupid, dumb moron. He made a mental note to ask Dick if having little brothers was always this stressful, and if so how the hell Dick coped with having three of them.

He was trying not to think about Bruce’s voice, when Dick had said, *Hey. B. I’ve got somebody on the other line for you that needs to talk to you*— when Bruce had said, in his public, polite voice, *Yes?* Jason had said *It’s me, Bruce.*

The sound of something rustling sharply, then *Jason?* As though he could hardly believe it. Like somebody had shot him.

Jason had kept it quick, tried to make his voice surly and snappish. He honestly wasn’t sure how well he had succeeded. *I’m at the safehouse on 54th. Can you come get me?*

Can you come get me.

A phrase he had once said all the time. The phrase that was, of course, met with a blown-open, hastily put together, *What—yes, of course. I'll . . . be right there, all right? Are you—*

I'll see you soon. Jason had hung up. He couldn't take any more than that.

There was the gentle sound of several locks being expertly forced, and Jason listened from his kitchen floor as the world's greatest detective broke carefully into his safehouse.

Jason turned his head. Bruce rounded the corner a second later, in civvies but clearly just off patrol, his hair slightly damp from a shower.

He took in the destroyed kitchen and Jason's filthy, bloody self, collapsed against the side of the counters like somebody had dropped him there, and immediately bent for Jason.

Something inside Jason shrieked *NO* as Bruce reached for him, face carefully controlled but eyes wild, and Jason snapped out, "DON'T touch me."

He felt like an animal caught by its throat, unable to run and unable to fight. He hadn't felt like this in a long, long time, and it made him nearly feral with despair that Bruce was witnessing it. It wasn't *right,* it wasn't *fair,* he wanted him *out—*

Bruce crouched, far enough away that he couldn't reach out and touch Jason, but close enough that Jason could see him. Muscling down whatever reaction had been building, Bruce said, "I just want to take a look at that shoulder, Jason. You're bleeding through the bandage."

Bruce stayed crouched while Jason tried to pull himself back together. *God,* he was so tired. He was so tired of this bullshit. He wanted Bruce to get out of his sight right then, and only his promise to Tim kept him from yelling those exact words.

Finally, he bit out, "Fine."

Bruce moved calmly and slowly, and it pissed Jason off because it eased the tension. He let Bruce work in silence, pulling off the bloodied bandage he'd hastily tied, let Bruce attend to it with the first-aid kit he'd retrieved from somewhere among the wreckage. Jason

kept his eyes off to the left the whole time. He didn't want to read what was on Bruce's face. He always knew how Bruce was feeling, no matter how much he tried to hide it. He hadn't spent three years with Bruce for nothing.

Once that was finished, Bruce said, "Are you hurt anywhere else?"

"Not anything that'll kill me," Jason said. "Did you talk to Tim?"

The question slipped out. He had meant to say nothing besides, "Take me back to Wayne Manor, Worst Person in the World, this doesn't mean anything and I still hate you," but he felt jittery and off and the terror inside of him was rising up again. He needed to hear it from somebody else.

If this question surprised Bruce, he didn't let it into his voice. "No. He's sleeping in the car with Dick. They're on their way down."

Jason *hmm* ed in response. The viselike grip of fear lessened.

"So you were in the same place?"

Jason shifted, letting his elbows rest on his knees. He still wouldn't look at Bruce, snapping out, "What."

"You and Tim," Bruce clarified. "You've been in the same place."

"Well, yeah."

"Why are you in different places now, then? Did you drop him off up with Dick?"

Jason gave a short bark of bitter laughter. "Do I look like I can drive right now? 'Course not. And I never would've left Tim with Dick, I would've gone in with him. He has this shitty habit of finding the worst kind of trouble when he's by himself. It's insane, I don't know how you handle him."

"He wouldn't have been alone. He would have been with Dick." Bruce was probing him, trying to get more information without coming out with it outright, but Jason didn't have the brainpower for 6-D chess tonight.

"I don't care," Jason said shortly. "It doesn't matter. We were in a different dimension, and it spit us out in different places. I was on the phone with Dick because. . . "

Because I left Tim behind and I thought it killed him and I had to tell someone and then Jason was putting a hand over his eyes and shaking finely all over, and he just wanted Bruce and everyone in the world to leave him alone to rot.

"Jason," Bruce was saying, over and over, and somehow Jason didn't flinch when a big hand landed on his good shoulder. "Jason. It's all right. It's all right."

He couldn't admit to all of it without opening up a wound too raw to touch, so he forced out, "I thought. Tim was dead, and. It turned out he was just with Dick, but. Christ. *Christ.* Get off me," and he shook Bruce's hand off and felt a curl of self-disgust move through him when he missed the warmth immediately after.

"It's all right," murmured Bruce again. "Jason."

Jason took one deep breath, and then another, and then another. "He's a good kid," he muttered into his hand, after several long minutes.

"I'm rather partial to him," Bruce said mildly. He was still disguising a big something, but he was doing a good job of it, and it anchored Jason a little.

Jason took another deep breath. He hadn't confronted this in the Labyrinth because it had been fight or flight, move or die, but now it was looming in front of him, this terrible thing, and it was the fact that he didn't have his hatred of Tim to shield him. Without it in the way, there was startlingly little left for his rage and hatred to hold on to, and it let the pain seep through in an unending stream—there was nothing to protect him from it, nothing to stop his longing, nothing to keep him from knowing that he wanted to go home so badly he thought he might die.

Bruce had replaced him, maybe. But that kid had needed Bruce so much that Jason couldn't fault either of them for it, now.

Jason said, "I get it, okay. I didn't get it before, but I get it now. You knew he needed you."

Bruce shifted until he was sitting next to Jason. After a moment, he said, "Sounds like you and Tim had quite the time."

Still probing for more information. He and Tim were so similar, like dogs with bones.

“I said I get it,” said Jason. “I know what he left behind.”

“He told you?”

“No. I saw it,” said Jason, staring studiously at the wall. Bruce was silent, waiting, so Jason said, “It was . . . we were trapped in another dimension, some kind of fucked up playhouse that showed us our worst fears. Our worst memories.”

He remembered Tim’s father’s face, twisted with a black, vicious fury. Tim’s terror that his father was going to find them. Tim hadn’t even looked that scared with literal death staring him in the face. Jason was no stranger to cruel men living in the same house, but at least Jason had been afforded the luxury of hating them.

Bruce sucked in a sharp breath. Appalled, he said, “For eleven days?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Jason said curtly.

Bruce shifted. Jason could nearly hear him forcing down more questions, returning to the matter at hand, to Jason’s earlier comment. “Well then. Tim and I needed each other. And I made a lot of mistakes in the beginning with him.”

Now Bruce was piquing Jason’s curiosity in return, forcing him to engage. This motherfucker. He’d never forgotten how to get Jason to keep talking to him when all Jason wanted to do was shut down. Knowing he was being played didn’t stop him from walking into it. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Bruce twisted his big watch around his wrist. “I was very. . . distant with him. I held him at arm’s length for a long time. I thought it was. . . protecting him.” Jason glanced over. Bruce was frowning, staring at his hands. “It didn’t. Protect him, that is. In fact, I missed a lot of. . . signs I should have seen earlier because of it. And then there was this one night. . . ” Bruce shook his head a little. “Anyway.”

“When his dad fucked him up and Tim ran to hide at your house,” Jason surmised.

Bruce glanced over at him.

Jason’s mouth curled. "Saw a nice replay of that one.”

“Did it. . .” Bruce hesitated. “That night, Jack had broken Tim’s hand and bruised his temple and left eye. Is Tim’s hand. . .”

"He broke his *hand?"* Jason's head snapped up. *He was really bad that night,* Tim had said.

"Is it broken now?"

"No," said Jason, forcibly unclenching his hands. "No. It was. Some of it was just fear tactics. I saw. . . "

A shudder rippled through his whole body.

"I saw. All of it," he said, and his voice sounded nothing like his. Bruce went deathly still next to him. "All of it. The warehouse, that damn clown, the. . . me. I saw me, when I was fifteen, and I—"

He had to stop. Take another breath. He twisted his hands tightly. Tim's voice said, *He's not perfect. But he's always there.*

"Christ," said Bruce. "My God. Jaylad, you don't have to. . . "

That fucking nickname.

"Be quiet and let me. Let me talk," said Jason, breathing very fast, shifting in place, searching for something to hold on to. "Let me fucking say this otherwise I never will, okay."

Bruce was silent immediately.

Jason said, "I'm never going to forgive you for not killing him. Okay? I'm not."

Bruce didn't say anything to that, either. Maybe he could hear how much even that cost him—and it did. It felt like it was ripping its way out of him, tearing through his stomach and his lungs. Jason stared straight ahead. If he looked over he would lose his nerve, and he had to say it.

"I know it's not your fault you weren't there," said Jason. He could feel tears on his jaw, on his nose. His voice was unsteady, chest shuddering. His guts felt like they were unspooling. "I get it. Nobody's omnipotent, not even Batman. I've still got shit to—work through, or whatever. But all I could think about in that fucking horror house—it showed Tim his mom. Tim saw his mom, and it fucking. . . broke him in half. But it wasn't really her at all, it was some insane ghost thing trying to kill him, and I—all I could fucking think about was that I was gonna see some fucked up version of you and that was the worst thing in the whole world. Just the thought that you. . . that I would

maybe get to see you but it wouldn't be you at all and it *wouldn't be you,* and even after all that shit between us I know that you. . . would help me if I needed it, and if I saw some *wrong* ghost of you in there —"

He was rambling now, there wasn't a fucking *point,* he just wanted it all out. He hated this. He kept going. Drain the infection, all of it—

"And I just. . . I realized. I. I realized that's what happened to. . . you. It was me but it wasn't, and I just. I don't know how to—" the horror was inside of him, a coiled snake, but if he didn't lay it all out on the line and make Bruce choose at some point, they would never get past this stalemate. He stopped, started again, still talking to the far wall. "I'll just never be him again. And I'm sorry, okay? But I want to. . . I'm so fucking tired of pretending like—" Here it was, he was going to say something normal and appropriately bitter like *I'm sick of pretending to be someone you want me to be* but what came out was "I'm so fucking tired of pretending like I don't want you to care about me the way I am now. Instead of just doing it because you feel guilty over some dead kid—I don't want to just be some fucking *obligation* because I was your son once—"

Bruce moved, then. He wrapped both arms around Jason, kneeling above him, careful of the shoulder, and gently crushed Jason to his chest.

Jason reached up and held Bruce's jacket, his arm, meaning to push Bruce back, but he just ended up holding on, and Bruce held him tighter.

"Oh, God, don't do that," muttered Jason, voice thick, making no move to exit the embrace. "We aren't supposed to do this, it—"

"All right, all right. It's my turn to talk, anyway." The voice rumbled in Jason's ear from where his head was leaning against Bruce's chest. "I do feel guilt over all of that. All of it. I wasn't there, and I should have been, but that isn't it at all."

He stroked a hand through Jason's hair, held him closer. Bruce smelled the same.

"I am your father," said Bruce, slow and clear. "You are my son. You could never speak to me again and I would be your father, and you would be my son. Forgiveness or not, I am your father, and you are my son. I do and will care about you no matter what. It is not about any sort of obligation, and. . . I am sorry. If that's the way you've felt.

If that's what's—kept you away."

Jason didn't say anything to this, but Bruce had to have felt him slowly relax, hold on to Bruce tighter.

Some wail deep inside of him quieted.

Bruce rested his chin lightly on Jason's head. "You know I'm. . . not the best at this. But I'm always here if you need me. And—I'm very, very glad to see you back."

Jason *hmm* ed quietly to show that he'd heard, that he was thinking.

Bruce surprised him by rumbling a quiet laugh.

"You think you're so different," he murmured, sounding faintly amused. "You are, to some extent, obviously. But you sound the same."

This was what got a response. Voice a little hoarse, Jason said, "Excuse you. My voice has dropped about two octaves."

Bruce made that small sound of amusement again. "And I'll bet you still hate Alfred's pancakes."

"That's because they're disgusting."

"And hate when people dog-ear pages."

"That's because that's barbaric."

"And listen to The Kinks. And eat from that same taco place down by Maria's. And fold your tacos that same bizarre way when you get them."

"Hey. It keeps it from—"

"—from letting the stuffing out," Bruce finished with him. "Just—"

"Don't say just *eat a burrito—"*

"Eat a burrito," finished Bruce. "There, hm?"

Jason digested this. Bruce let him, still absently stroking his hair like he was a child.

"Is this. . . all right?"

“Room for improvement,” said Jason. “But not a terrible showing.”

“Hmm,” Bruce said finally.

“*Hmm,”* Jason mocked him back without thinking.

Bruce said, “You aren’t the same as you were, that’s true. But I’m not who you remember, either. But I’d. . . like to find a way forward, if you’re open to that.”

Jason was quiet for a long time. He didn’t move, though. He was just too tired to push Bruce away.

Finally, he said, “Okay.”

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

> Hi babes!! We have reached the end of this journey together. For everyone who has come along on this wild ride with me, from those who have been here since the beginning to those who will be here in the future, I thank you very, very much. Your presence and kudos and comments have meant the world to me. I hope it was an adventure worth having.

Jason showered after that. He batted Bruce away, growled that he needed some alone time and that he wasn't going to show up to *Alfred's house* covered in who-knows-what because he wasn't a complete and total asshat, thanks very much. Then he sat down in the shower because his feet hurt too much to stand and pressed his fingertips against his eyes until the tears stopped, and then he stayed in the shower until the water got cold because he was sluggishly working through his thoughts, trying to decide if he'd given too much, if this stripped-bare feeling was going to kill him (it wasn't, it just felt like it, was his venomous conclusion), and after his shower had the reluctant thought that he felt. . . better. Lighter. And fucking exhausted. Wrung out, like a cleaning rag.

He thought about Tim, forgiving him in a cave for something that should have been unforgivable, and thought that Tim was probably better than most people he knew. A shithead, to be sure. But better. Maybe someday he could do that. It wasn't today—not by a long shot—but maybe. Someday.

Then he dressed in loose clothes, didn't make eye contact with his reflection, and slouched out with his hands in his pockets to find Bruce sweeping broken glass into the trash can.

He shuddered a little. God, he was gonna have nightmares for months.

Bruce saw him. Jason waited for a comment about the ruined kitchen.

Casting an eye over him, all Bruce said was, "Ready to go?"

"Yeah."

“Dick called. They’ll probably beat us there.”

“Okay.”

Maybe nothing would change, after all. The memory of the hug already felt strange, surreal. Jason shifted, walked to the door, tried to move away from the awkward stiltedness of their conversation. Maybe it was—

Bruce reached up and ruffled the hair at the back of his head. “And no comments about my driving.”

Jason’s shoulders relaxed. “Then don’t drive like a grandpa.”

“I don’t.” Bruce followed him down the stairs, and didn’t say anything about how carefully Jason was holding his body.

“Not when you’re in the Batmobile, you don’t. It’s a jarring difference, y’know.”

“I’ve got to follow traffic laws when I’m not in the Batmobile.”

“No you don’t. You can just buy off the cops.”

“Yes, and that won’t undermine anything I’ve spent my life doing, at all.”

“Bad cops are bad cops. Nothin’ you can do about that.”

Bruce just sighed and climbed into the driver’s seat. The car jumped to life with a silky purr—he was driving one of the faster numbers tonight—and Jason pushed back the seat to distribute the weight of his body more equally. Not that it did a lot; he hurt all over.

It was snowing, but lightly enough that driving wasn’t dangerous yet. The lights began to blur together, and Jason’s blinks got longer. The movement of the car lulled him. It was fine. He was in a car, and somebody else was taking care of things. The horror would catch up to him again later, but the realm of the unconscious was pulling at him.

Bruce pulled something from the backseat, draped it over him. It was wool. The expensive shit. Bruce’s coat. “You can sleep.”

“I don’t want to sleep,” Jason snipped drowsily. He was out like a light seconds later.

—

Tim didn't sleep well on the car ride down.

It started to snow. It was nearly four in the morning, but Dick wasn't close to sleeping. He kept glancing over at Tim, bundled up next to him in the passenger seat, holding himself like he was afraid he was going to fall apart if he didn't. Dick kept reaching over and running his hand through Tim's hair, across his shoulder. God. Tim was alive. Jason was alive.

Tim kept up his flat refusal that he wouldn't talk about any of it. Every time he startled awake, he stared up at Dick with haunted, sick eyes, until he seemed to see Dick properly and tired relief filtered through. No, he didn't want anything to eat, he was fine thanks. Turn the heat up, please. No, it's okay, it's nothing. Fine, he'd drink some Gatorade.

The third time he jerked up, Dick just kept a hand on Tim's shoulder, rubbing his thumb back and forth over the joint while Tim slept. It seemed to help a little, and they finished the drive without Tim balking awake again.

For a minute, Dick let the car idle in park, pulling out his phone and reading his texts. Wally had spread the report, but per Dick's request, he'd been very adamant that nobody bother the Waynes for several days at least. There were a few short well-wishing texts, all of them insisting that Dick call if he needed anything. It soothed Dick's frayed edges a little. It would be okay. Tim and Jason were back with their family, and it would be okay.

He put the phone away and scrubbed a hand over his face, taking a deep, calming breath.

"You okay?"

Dick glanced over. Tim blinked at him in the half-light from the garage, circles under his eyes, face wan and drawn. When something traumatic happened to him, Tim always stopped sleeping. He hadn't slept more than an hour at a time for two weeks after his father had died.

Only Bruce had managed to properly console him. Dick wished that B had been waiting for him. Tim looked like he could use Bruce right about then, with his big, reassuring hands and the encircling wall of his embrace.

“Yeah, Tim. B isn’t back with Jason yet. Alfred’s up, though.”

Tim nodded, wincing as he moved. Dick turned off the car, hit the button to close the garage. Tim left the blanket in the car, standing lopsided, waiting. There was still something wild and twitchy in his hands, but he looked bone-weary, distant. Dick pulled Tim against his side again as they walked in.

“It’s okay,” Tim said, even as he moved into the half-embrace. “It’s. You don’t have to—”

“I want to,” Dick assured him quietly, and Tim tucked himself closer, shoulders hunching.

The house was dark, for the most part. Lights were on strategically, which meant Damian was probably sleeping.

They headed for the kitchen, passing through the main foyer. Tim’s body tensed a little, and when Dick looked at him, Tim was staring up at the ceiling, far enough up that Dick could see the whites of his eyes. A shudder rolled through him all at once, like he was freezing.

Dick squeezed him, trying to pull him back. Tim blinked, shook himself a little. When Dick stared at him, he shrugged—then all at once, he looked like he was going to break again, horror rising in his eyes, and he pressed his lips together into a white, seamless line.

“Master Dick,” said a voice. “Is that Master Tim?”

Alfred had come out of the kitchen. Tim slipped out from under Dick’s arm and went to meet him, shrugging off whatever he had been feeling before. In a rare burst of emotion, Alfred lifted his hands to Tim’s face, and Tim hugged him.

“Oh, dear boy,” murmured Alfred, cupping the back of Tim’s head. “It’s so wonderful to see you. Are you all right?”

“Well. More or less,” said Tim. “Where’s—”

“I’ll get him.” Dick was already moving for the stairs. “Alfred, is there any of that soup left from Tuesday?”

“Do you know, I believe there is. Tea as well, Master Tim?”

Tim murmured an answer. Dick was already striding down the hall, making for Damian’s bedroom.

Alfred the cat wound out when he opened the door, *mrrrp*ing quietly as he left. Dick flipped on the lamp next to Damian's bed, reaching for the curled up lump buried underneath the comforters. Damian always got colder than the rest of them in the winter—something about being born and partially raised in a desert. Dick shook his shoulder gently.

"Stop that," grumbled the lump, "or I will cut off your hand. What is it?"

"It's me," Dick murmured, and Damian shoved back the covers over his face at once. His hair was sticking up every which way, dark eyes blinking owlishly. When he saw Dick, he went rigid.

"Richard? I thought you were in Bludhaven. What is wrong?"

For once, it wasn't bad news, and that was maybe why Dick's smile was huge and helpless. "Tim's downstairs, Dames."

Damian froze, and then he was leaping from his bed, sprinting out of the room. Only Dick's longer legs helped him keep pace.

"Why didn't you *say?"* Damian hissed as he ran. "How long has— wait." He spun around, and Dick nearly ran headlong into him, pinwheeling his arms a little as he stopped flat. "Where is Todd? Was Timothy— did Todd—"

"No, no. Dad went to get Jason, okay? We're all good." Damian darted away again, and Dick, remembering how shockingly fragile Tim had looked in the car, felt the need to add to his forceful little brother, "Just be careful with Tim, okay—"

Damian whirled again, looking apocalyptic, which was his way of hiding that he was anxious. "Why? What has happened? Why wasn't I notified of this before?"

"Because we walked in about four seconds ago," said Dick patiently. "He's in the kitchen. He has a stab wound in his side."

Damian scowled viciously and was off like a shot again, flying down the stairs. "Timothy?" he called, and there was a startling note of vulnerability buried in the sharp sound.

Dick followed him down.

"Damian?" Tim's voice said. "*Damian."*

Tim came out of the kitchen to meet him just as Damian was heading down the hall towards it.

Damian stopped dead, body tense, and then launched himself forward. He held himself back a little when he hit Tim, embracing him with care, mindful of Dick's warning, but Tim put both arms around him clutched him close, burying his face in Damian's hair. A shudder rippled through him.

Dick let out a long breath, chest tight, tight, tight. He put both hands over his face, and when he'd pulled himself together a little, he went over and put his arms around both of them, kissing Tim's head and stroking Damian's hair, breath shaking out of him.

They stayed that way for a while, until Alfred cleared his throat and said, a little mistily, "Your tea, Master Tim."

As they walked back into the kitchen, Damian clung to Tim with both hands. "Where have you been? Richard told me someone stabbed you. Tell me where they are, I will *dispatch* them—"

Tim lowered himself into the chair, flinching a little. "Wouldn't worry too much about it, okay? I was in an another dimension with Jason."

Damian seethed. "If someone thinks they can touch my brother, they are *sorely* mistaken—"

Tim blew on his tea and touched Damian's shoulder. "Missed you too," he said, nudging Damian a little. "It's okay. I. . . a lot happened over there, and I'll tell you later. Just not tonight, okay? I want to sleep."

Damian settled a little, a porcupine lowering its quills. "Fine," he bit out, pulling his chair close to Tim's.

Damian watched attentively while Tim sipped his tea, a single-minded focus that would have unnerved anyone outside the family. It didn't faze Tim at all, though, who nursed his tea tiredly, and Dick went into the hall to call Wally with a quick update and leave a voicemail for Barbara. Stephanie would have to wait until tomorrow. She would insist on barging her way in, and Dick really didn't think Tim could handle anyone outside immediate family. Forget that. *Dick* couldn't handle anyone outside the immediate family.

Wally told him to get some sleep, and just then, it sounded nice. For the first time in eleven days, Dick felt like he *could,* and not be

plagued by relentless nightmares of Tim and Jason being viscerally torn apart.

He hid an enormous yawn behind his hand as Tim walked out of the kitchen, closely shadowed by Damian.

“Think you can try to sleep?” he asked Tim, noting the way he was leaning again. He was radiating exhaustion.

“Yeah,” Tim said, yawning back at him. “Probably. I want to see B first.”

“They’ll be here soon. Let’s get you situated first—”

Tim suddenly looked awake and wary, an animal that sensed a trap. “Not upstairs.”

Dick blinked. “Tim—”

“*Not* upstairs.” Tim’s eyes were huge in his head.

Damian pushed at Tim. “We wouldn’t all fit in your bed,” he said matter-of-factly. “The TV room in the south wing will suffice. The sofas will be perfectly adequate beds for tonight.”

Tim calmed a little. God. Dick felt suddenly helpless, fear twisting inside of him. What the hell had they *done* to him that he was frightened of ceilings, of his own bedroom—

He shook himself. “I’ll get blankets and pillows.”

Damian herded Tim off down the hallway.

They needed sleep. All of them. It had been a long week and a half for everybody. They would reassess later.

He couldn’t stop seeing Tim’s shattered, white face on his couch, staring up at Dick’s ceiling while Dick begged him to breathe.

For a wild, furious second, he agreed with Damian. *If someone thinks they can touch my brother—*

Not helpful. Not helpful. He uncoiled his muscles, took three deep breaths. His rage wouldn’t help them now.

He was heading up the stairs to grab the blankets when he heard the deep rumble of Bruce’s voice.

“Bruce?” he called, darting back down the stairs.

Bruce turned. He had one hand on Jason’s shoulder, which was miraculous because that meant Jason was there and also because Jason wasn’t swearing blackly and backing away from Bruce until he was physically in another room.

Jason’s body was curled in the same way Tim’s was, like he’d been so banged up he was afraid if he moved too fast some of his bones would break. His hair was damp from a shower, too—which meant that he must have been as filthy and grimy as Tim had been, like both of them had been sleeping in the dirt and wading through dust and cobwebs. Jason’s face was flattened out of its usual sharp sarcasm, and his eyes were hollow and purple underneath, but when he saw Dick, his mouth twitched into a tired but genuine half-smile.

“Hey, Big Bird,” he said, and Dick flew at him, wrapping his arms around him.

“Watch the shoulder,” muttered Jason, tucking his face next to Dick’s.

“You get stabbed too?”

“Couldn’t let Tim have all the fun.”

Dick could feel it, how tired Jason was. Drained to the core. Wherever they’d been, it had stolen something from both of them, and Dick clutched Jason closer, fighting his rage again.

After a while, Jason said, “All right, big guy. All right,” but his voice was hoarse, ragged. Dick held him a moment longer before letting him go.

As he did, Jason looked up, far enough that Dick could see the whites of his eyes.

“Tim did that too,” Dick said.

Jason looked back at him. “Did what?”

“Looked at the ceiling.”

Jason’s smile was not a happy one, curled and lifeless. “I’ll bet he did. You’d better not have made him go upstairs.”

“He said he wouldn’t.”

“You wouldn’t either, if you’d been where we were,” Jason told him, eyes flat.

“Look,” Dick said, something like desperation rising in him, “Look. I know it’s late and neither of you have slept in what looks like days, but for God’s sake. Tim won’t tell me anything, and if I’m going to help—”

“You and your helping. *I* don’t want to talk about it either,” said Jason testily, “but if you insist, oh ye firstborn, I’ll just say this: we’ve spent eleven days in some fucked up hell where we saw the worst parts of our lives paraded in front of us in a freak show that would give any fucking villain in Gotham nightmares. Now leave me alone, and leave Tim alone too.”

Dick stared at him.

“Yeah,” snapped Jason, reading Dick’s shock. “Been real busy the last couple days, that’s for sure.”

Then his face twisted, eyes
terrible.

“All right, you two,” said Bruce, in his steady, firm Dad voice. “It’s been a long night. We’ll talk in the morning, and *only,”* he added, when Jason opened his mouth, “when everyone is ready.”

Dick found his voice enough to say, thick with horror, “Jay. . . ”

“Oh, fucking—don’t,” said Jason, turning away from him, scrubbing his hands over his face. “Don’t. Fuck. We’re out now, God. That’s all that matters. Just—”

“Enough,” Bruce murmured, touching Jason’s shoulder. He touched Dick’s shoulder, too, and Dick saw the circular way of time, saw the ghosts of their past standing here, in this exact position, when he and Jason used to fight before. “Enough. Jason, go and say hello to Alfred. He’s been worried about you.”

Dick waited for Jason to bristle, rile up at being bossed around. All he said, though, was, “Fine. Go find your kid.”

“I did,” Bruce said, bending a little to get Jason to meet his eyes. “Is my kid okay to go see Alfred and get something to eat?”

His voice was light, but his eyes were piercing. It was a legitimate

question.

“Yeah.” Jason’s voice was quiet again, the fight gone. This time, though, Dick could hear the difference, could hear Jason’s voice; it wasn’t just that he was tired. He wasn’t fighting with Bruce on purpose. Something had shifted; something with *them* had shifted.

Jason tipped his head a little. He was staring off to the left, eyes far away, but his voice was blunt and present. “Go find Tim. I’m hungry, I’ll eat. Tell Tim I’ll come soon, he’ll . . . want to know. He just needs you right now.”

Dick had nearly forgotten that was how Jason spoke to Bruce when he wasn’t angry: easy, unoffended, straight to the point.

Bruce hummed, squeezed his shoulder, pushed him lightly. Again, the touch was accepted—Jason walked off down the hall, to the kitchen, and Dick saw the way he watched the shadows, the same way Tim did. Dick was turning on every goddamn light in this house, electricity saving be damned.

“You guys talked,” Dick said, nearly accusatory. They had had some hard conversations in the past, Dick knew, but the progress was always one step forward, two steps back. This felt like they had suddenly jumped a whole mile.

Bruce just nodded, crossed his arms. His eyes stared off into the distance, forehead creasing.

“He saw it all,” he said, voice quiet enough that Dick had to strain to hear it. “His death, the Joker. Tim saw Janet and Jack. God knows what else. It was designed to them specifically. That’s all I could get out of him. I’m not prying anymore tonight.”

Dick wished very dearly there was something near him that he could break. He felt that it would make him feel better. As it was, he just cursed between his teeth and stared at the ceiling. “Goddamnit,” he added for good measure, voice burning. “Goddamn. Goddamn whatever that place was. It wasn’t enough to live it once. . . ”

Bruce said, visibly filing the information away, “That’s for us to handle later. If Tim’s not upstairs, then where. . . ”

Dick shook himself. “Uh, TV room. Couch is big enough. Damian’s with him.”

Bruce nodded. “Will you grab—”

“—pillows and blankets and stuff, yeah.”

“Is Tim hurt? What was that about stabbing?”

“Something got him in his side. It wasn’t very deep. Cleaned and stitched it. He’s bruised everywhere—got a cut on his head, too, but I don’t think it’s a concussion. I’d feel better if you checked it, though. . . ”

“Has he taken his antibiotics?”

“Yeah.”

“Thank God you found him.”

“I didn’t,” Dick said tonelessly. “Wally did. He was wandering down the street.”

Bruce didn’t say anything to that, but his eyes grew hard, hard like they were when he was Batman facing down his cruelest enemies, and his body became stone.

Dick shifted tiredly, and went to head back down the hall.

Bruce caught his arm, shedding his Batman exterior in an instant. “Dick. Are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m just,” Dick waved his hand around to encompass the general mayhem. He added, nonsensically, “It’s not. A problem.”

“You’ve done well,” Bruce said, freeing him; Dick’s shoulders slumped. “Tim’s here, he’s safe. We can sleep on that. You’ve done well,” he repeated, and put his hand to Dick’s neck, grounding him.

Dick was really going to fall apart, but in, like, an hour or so, when everybody else was asleep. He just nodded, then went upstairs to maybe fall apart a little and then get it together enough to come back downstairs to sleep with all of his brothers in one room.

Goddamn. They were all going to sleep in the same room, willingly. He shook his head a little, thinking about all the times in the last few hours that Tim had asked about Jason, and Jason had asked about Tim. And two weeks ago they couldn’t even look at each other.

We’re good, Tim had said.

What a hell of a thing. Dick went upstairs.

Damian was somehow both less and more overbearing that Dick. He wasn't as earnestly worried as Dick was, but he was intense, and he had a strange brand of *fussing* that was difficult to translate if you weren't an immediate family member.

The enormous couch pulled out all the way so it resembled one huge bed, and Tim was already propped up on one side of it, watching Damian bustle snappishly around the room. Tim put up with it because he wanted to stay in the same room as Damian, chase all those horrifying images of him tied up, broken, bleeding, screaming out of his head, but he kept spacing out. Focusing was getting more difficult; he was crashing, hard. He needed to sleep. He was afraid to sleep.

Damian was shoving Titus away from Tim when Tim heard the footsteps. He knew whose they were, and his head fell back against the couch, relief pouring through him in a crushing wave, his chest crumpling.

Bruce rounded the corner a second later, shoes and coat still on, and it was him, it was really him, and Tim hadn't seen any horrible version of him in the Labyrinth, and hadn't he cried enough—

Bruce was sitting next to him in a second, pulling him up and propping Tim against his shoulder, folding Tim against him. Tim grabbed on to him, shuddering.

Bruce's whole hand fit over Tim's head. For a second, he only held Tim, their heads close together.

"Hi, Dad," whispered Tim, and Bruce kissed the top of his head.

Then he said, "Damian. Will you go ask Alfred to get a heating pad going for Tim, his skin is too cold. If you're sleeping here, make sure to bring the cat in. I don't want him scratching at the front door because he thinks you're gone." His voice rumbled in Tim's ear, reverberating from where it was pressed to Bruce's chest.

Damian must have hesitated, because Bruce said, not unkindly, "It's all right. I've got him."

Reluctantly: "All right." The sound of Damian's footsteps retreating.

Bruce held Tim, rocked him a little like he was a child, cupped the

back of his head.

Finally he said, “Jason is downstairs. He said you’d like to know.”

Tim nodded.

Bruce moved a hand over his hair. “Will you be all right to sleep here?”

“Yeah.”

Bruce shifted a little, and he must have felt Tim tense up, because he said, “Easy. Just checking your head. Dick says he doesn’t think it’s a concussion.”

Bruce pulled back, set Tim against the couch again.

Bruce looked tired, but there was a quiet, burning joy in his eyes, and he cupped Tim’s face in his hands, searching.

“I’m okay,” Tim felt obliged to say.

Bruce smiled a little, but it wasn’t humorous. “Jason told me a little of what happened.”

Tim shook his head. “We’re out now, I don’t know why I’m—” Tim stopped. Scrubbed a hand over his face. “Sorry.”

Bruce stroked his hair again. “You’re all right. You’re with us now.”

Tim nodded, took a breath.

Bruce asked him the same questions Dick had. Checked his head. Checked the bandages on his side. Tim answered them all, settling further back into the couch, unspeakably eased by Bruce’s indomitable, grounding presence.

When he was finished cross-examining, Bruce said, “And Tim.”

Tim glanced up.

“I can’t tell you. . . ” Bruce stopped. Tapped Tim’s wrist gently. He shook his head a little, and all the worry and distress seemed to settle heavy on him, and Tim thought about the fact that Bruce had probably been having a pretty terrible time for the last two weeks.

“Sorry we ruined Christmas,” Tim offered.

Bruce huffed a soft laugh and ruffled Tim's hair. "Oh, Tim." Then, quieter: "Tim. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay," Tim whispered back.

The door smacked against the far wall as Damian came back in, armed with a heating pad and an extra blanket.

"Pennyworth wishes to know if you require more tea," Damian announced, pushing the heating pad at Tim. Tim hugged it to his chest, and Bruce busied himself tucking the blanket around Tim's legs. This was fussing, too, and ordinarily it would make Tim embarrassed and edgy, but he was too busy listening to the two voices coming down the hall.

"—my *tea,* Dick, I am carrying tea. Watch it, for the love of fuck."

"It's a good thing you're an invalid and I have to be nice to you—"

Jason, highly offended: "I am not an *invalid."*

Damian straightened up, spine rigid, dark eyes flashing from the door to Tim's face; some part of Tim recognized gratefully that Damian was choosing Tim in this time of stress, would force Jason out of the room if Tim showed any signs of not wanting Jason around. Bruce had gone carefully still beside him, and he watched Tim's face closely, trying to disguise the guarded curiosity there.

Tim sat up, palms flat on the couch cushions. Bruce and Damian could analyze all they wanted. Ten days ago he would have fled the room, gone upstairs and hidden from the easy camaraderie of Jason and Dick, the weird reluctant closeness of Bruce and Jason. He didn't know how to tell Bruce not to worry, because he got it now: he understood why Bruce and Dick would have done anything to keep Jason.

Even if Jason was going to be different now. Even if Jason ignored him from now until forever.

Before he could sneak down that familiar rabbit hole of anxiety, though, Jason came in, followed by Dick, who was balancing a very precarious stack of pillows and blankets.

Jason looked tired and grouchy, one hand gripping a cup of tea like he was about to use it as some kind of weapon. He was showered, too, in loose clothes like Tim, favoring his shoulder.

Jason stopped. He and Tim gazed at each other for a second.

Then Jason walked over to the couch and reached out, ruffling Tim's hair gently. For a second, he just rested his hand on top of Tim's head, and Tim felt like he could sleep.

"Thanks," Tim said quietly, for lack of anything better to say. "For keeping the promise."

Jason rolled his eyes, but his scowl was over-blown and dramatic, a far cry from the actual narrow, still look he got when he was really upset. "Don't sound so surprised, you little shit. Hold this." He handed Tim his tea.

Tim held the tea. That taken care of, Jason crawled carefully in to wedge himself between Tim and the edge of the couch, body warm against Tim's cold one.

Jason took his tea back. Without looking at Tim, he nudged Tim's shoulder with his, then settled further down into the couch.

Tim's body relaxed. So Jason was just as stressed as he was. He could work with that.

Tim shoved himself further down on the couch, too. He said, "Dick, hand me the blue one."

Dick wordlessly handed him the blue pillow. Wincing as it pulled at his side, Tim shoved the blue pillow behind his head and shoulders and wiggled until he was comfortable.

"Well, come on," Jason snapped irritably when nobody said anything, all of them too busy staring. It would have made Tim laugh if he wasn't ten seconds away from plunging into sleep. "I want to go to sleep, for the love of God. Figure out where you're all going so we can do that."

"Okay, bossy britches, jeez," muttered Dick, throwing a blanket over Jason, too.

"I," said Jason, closing his eyes, "am going to *generously* ignore that you just used the phrase '*bossy britches,'* but I will be bringing it up later, for embarrassment purposes."

"Joke's on you, I don't *get* embarrassed," muttered Dick. Bruce passed a hand over Tim's hair again and moved, standing up to shed his coat.

Dick immediately crawled in to Bruce's vacated space, taking the spot on the other side of Tim.

"We know," mumbled Tim, eyes closing more often than they were opening. "Discowing is living proof of that."

"There was nothing wrong," Dick said primly, punching at his pillow a few times to make it comfortable, "with Discowing."

"There is much wrong with Discowing," muttered Damian darkly, wedging himself between Dick and Tim, pushing a pillow between himself and Tim's injured side so he wouldn't accidentally nudge against it during the night. "So much that we do not have time to discuss it all."

"Hey," said Dick, half-heartedly indignant. He'd already closed his eyes, settling down. Tim felt a brief flash of guilt; Dick had to be exhausted. "B. Back me up here."

Bruce just pulled a blanket up and over Dick's shoulders. "This is where I plead the fifth."

Dick made a vaguely dissatisfied hum, yawning.

Tim smiled to himself, closing his eyes.

Bruce flicked off the lights.

Tim was awake. Jason grabbed his arm, tight.

Tim said urgently, "Turn that back on," at the same time Jason said, "Not like that."

Dick sat up, woken back up by the alarm in both of their voices, and Damian moved swiftly out from under the covers before Bruce switched on a lamp by their couch. He'd made it all the way across the room in about a second.

"Better?" he asked, voice deceptively casual. His eyes were piercing in the lamplight, studying both Tim and Jason. "We can turn on another one. Or the overhead lights again."

Tim took a second to blink away the creepy crawlies that *weren't* coming out of the shadows. Embarrassing, being afraid of the dark like a child. Tim pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and his forefinger. "That's fine," he muttered, shifting a little so his weight

didn't push on his side.

Bruce *hmmed,* and settled down in an overstuffed armchair next to the couch. After a long second, Damian pulled the blankets up to his nose, and Dick lay back down beside him.

Warmth seeped through him, and real calm slowed his heartbeat. Tim exhaled, and then he was asleep, quick and deep and complete.

He slept for twelve hours. He woke up twice. The first time was Jason's nightmare, and by the time Tim had dragged himself up out of sleep to roll over and say something, Bruce was already leaning over the edge of the couch murmuring to him, rubbing at his shoulder. Jason turned over to face him, said something in an unsteady voice. Bruce just nodded, talked to him some more. Jason let him, and Tim had time to wonder what, exactly, they'd talked about before he fell back asleep.

The second time was his own nightmare. Shadows moved in and out, punctuated by a strange journey trying and failing to realize why he was chasing after his own mother, who kept laughing and moving away from him, and in the meantime he could hear someone screaming—

Damian or Dick or Jason, and he knew they were in trouble, down in a hole gleaming with bones, but he couldn't seem to find—

"Sweetheart. Tim. It's all right. Nobody's hurt, you're all right," and when Tim pulled himself awake, shaking and disoriented, it was Bruce was leaning over him instead, rubbing *his* shoulder, and when Jason rolled over and dropped a heavy hand gracelessly on Tim's shoulder, mumbling, "'s fine, Timbit, go back to sleep," Tim did.

When he woke up for real, he felt several inches shy of utter and absolute shit, but when he saw the ceiling above him and looked around at the abandoned and rumpled nest of pillows and blankets all around him, the tense adrenaline drained out of him as quickly as it had come. He fumbled around for a minute before slowly sitting up, wincing at the aches and pains all over his entire body.

"Painkillers on the side table. Welcome back to the land of the fuckin' living," said a voice to his left.

Tim looked around. Jason was in Bruce's armchair with a truly wild case of bedhead, book in his hand and one of Dick's sweatshirts on.

Yawning, Tim said, “Yeah, yeah. You look like a porcupine. A particularly disgruntled squirrel.”

Jason smirked at him. “That is nothing compared to you, Sleeping Beauty. Do you scare criminals off with that morning face?”

Tim just flipped him off, downing the painkillers and the glass of water on the side table gratefully. “Where is everybody?”

“Downstairs. Breakfast. Cass is due in an hour. We fucked up Christmas, so apparently there’s a redo happening.”

“Mmm.” Tim dragged himself to the edge of the sofa and swung his feet down, rubbing crust from his eyes. “Why aren’t you with them? God, I need coffee. I am so excited for coffee.”

“Because they’re fucking smothering me,” said Jason, making a face. “God. I thought Damian was bad when he was criticizing every move I made. It’s so much worse when he’s being nice. He was making a literal pile of food in front of me.”

“He learned from Alfred,” said Tim, carefully stretching his body. “Food fixes everything. But he’s thirteen and not very good at being a person so he takes it overboard. It’s one of his stress responses.”

“Huh,” said Jason. “How do I make it stop?”

“Yeah, when I figure that out, I’ll let you know.” Bracing himself, Tim heaved himself to his feet. “God. My feet. Ow.”

“Then stop standing, you absolute moron,” said Jason. “They’ll bring you breakfast.”

Tim sat back down. “Ow. Ouch. Ow.” He pulled himself so his feet were up and his back was against the couch. “Ow.”

“Whiny little baby,” said Jason, pointedly flapping his book open and going back to it.

“Jackass.” Tim tilted his head to look outside. The curtains were parted, and snow fell in fat, heavy flakes. He glanced over at Jason, and it struck him that this felt so normal, like they’d done this forever, like they really had grown up here together, instead of years apart.

Jason glanced up at him when Tim was quiet for too long. “You good?”

Tim looked up at the ceiling and said, “Yeah. You know, you are required by family law to be the fun older brother. Dick spends half his life shooting down my fun ideas, and I actually need someone in my life to enable me who isn’t also invincible to the consequences.”

It took Jason a few minutes to answer, and Tim let him have them.

“Well, that’s good,” said Jason, in a voice carefully put together. “Because I’d be shit at following Dick’s act.”

“Well, you are a bossy britches,” Tim reminded him sagely, “which is nothing like Dick has ever been,” and Jason laughed, that strange sharp joy particular to him alone thick in the sound.

“Cease that noise this instant or you will wake—oh. Good morning, Timothy,” said Damian, stopping short the hissing tirade that absolutely would have woken Tim had he actually been asleep. “Breakfast is downstairs. Todd has already eaten.”

“Guess that’s how you stop it,” Tim said to Jason, and Jason snickered. When Tim stood up, moaning and groaning, Jason groaned right along with him down the stairs, half-mocking Tim and half lamenting his own pain. When Tim said, “I thought they were smothering you,” Jason pretended not to hear him.

They went to the breakfast table where Dick was eating a truly appalling amount of sugary cereal, and Bruce looked less tired and glad to see him, and Damian began shoving food at him. An hour later Cass came, quietly ecstatic to see them in her own way, and then she sat with them, too, and they were all there, and Tim thought that this was it, maybe. They’d all been missing a piece somewhere, somehow, but nobody was missing now, and this was his family.

He and Jason told their family what had happened, and both of them, without discussing it beforehand, only clinically touched on the horrors. Dick still broke two mugs and Damian had to be talked out of smashing every mirror in the house no less than three times, and Bruce crossed his arms over his chest and tried to look clinical about it, too, but his pain for them was still visible sometimes when he looked knowingly at Jason and Tim when they skimmed over the particularly terrible parts, because he knew more than anyone what they’d really been through. Jason didn’t mention the Joker again, and Tim didn’t mention his mother.

The end was Tim’s telling, though, and Jason watched him just as intently as the rest of them when he told it.

“They just. . . let you go?” Jason’s eyes narrowed. “He just went into that hellhole knowing what it was and just let you back out?”

“Well,” said Bruce, “if his family was in there. Maybe it wouldn’t have been that much of a hellhole for him.”

“Hmmm,” said Jason skeptically, but he didn’t argue that point again.

“Well,” said Bruce, shifting into Batman-mode, “with your help, perhaps we can track this dimension down, find out what it really is.”

“Satan’s asshole,” muttered Jason, and Bruce said, in a voice that said if-I’ve-said-this-once -I’ve-said-it-a-million-times, “*Language.”*

“Yeah, Jay,” said Tim. “Watch your fucking language.”

Jason shoved at Tim, gently enough that Tim barely moved. Dick and Bruce exchanged a lightning quick look, and Dick’s amused confusion only grew over Bruce’s small, satisfied smile.

Out of all of them, only Bruce had suspected that Tim and Jason might really have gotten along if they’d just met under different circumstances—only he had seen that his two middle sons had, strangely, precisely the same sense of humor. It was his sense of humor, too, after all.

They never did find the Labyrinth. Nobody ever did. Whatever walked there was never touched by the outside again. But perhaps the inhabitants liked it that way.

One Year Later

The following Christmas Eve was an enormous affair, and it was this way without Bruce knowing quite precisely *how* it had happened. Tim had invited Kon and Damian had invited Jon without consulting anybody, but then Jon and Kon had decided to ask their parents to ask Bruce if the could come round, too, because they wanted their parents to be with them on Christmas Eve, but of course they couldn’t leave Ma and Pa Kent out of it, so in the end Martha had telephoned Bruce to let him know that she and her husband were coming to Christmas Eve without telling him about Clark and Lois, because she’d assumed Clark had already asked for his family, which he had not (Clark and

Lois were notoriously terrible at just turning up to things; it was the journalist blood, Bruce had always suspected gloomily). Stephanie and Barbara always turned up at things anyway, and Wally had been invited so Bart had been roped into it, and then Barry and Iris were there, too, and Diana loved Alfred's cooking so *she* was there, and Selina was always at holidays because she had taken a particular liking to Damian, specifically, which was giving Bruce a headache because God only knew what they were going to get up to.

The whole thing added up to a huge, decked-out hall full of people, and Bruce had to specify that he was waiving his no-metas-in-Gotham rule because it was *Christmas,* nevermind that the Supers were around all the time, thanks. He was just beginning to really settle, watching all of his children around him bright and happy for once, when Stephanie and Cass walked in late.

They were holding hands.

"Hey, hold on," said Tim, voice sharp. "What? *What?"*

Bruce felt the headache coming back.

"Are you two . . . wait. What? *Wait,"* said Dick, rounding on Bruce. "Did *you know about this?"*

"Cassandra, surely you can do better than *that,"* said Damian disparagingly, but Stephanie was too busy yelling at Tim to do battle with him just then. Bruce gave Damian a pointed look anyway, even though he knew Damian didn't really mean it.

"No," said Bruce to Dick, answering his question. It was a mark of how well everybody knew his family, really, that nobody even batted an eye at this behavior, and he even thought that the Kent brood had stopped really talking to each other in favor of pretending to talk to each other so they could listen in.

"*Cassandra,"* said Barbara, and that was how everyone knew they'd *really* been keeping it a secret, and he saw Jason reach for the bread basket, probably because there was no popcorn.

"Six *months!"* Tim yelled, and Stephanie yelled back, and Cass came over and kissed Bruce's cheek, smiling brightly, and Bruce gently nudged her chin, knowing that she knew she was already forgiven.

A peace was finally brokered when Alfred brought out the three turkeys with Kon's help, and everyone dug into the food. Bruce had

time to look around and think that everything was worth it, for this, for all of them to be here, and then Wally darted in and said, clearly only half-paying attention to what he was saying, “Hey, babe, can you come help me with the bread, I want you to check if it’s done in the middle,” and then he looked at Dick with an expression like a deer caught in the headlights and Dick choked on his food a little and then Tim repeated, voice deadly, “ *Babe?”* and Jason said, “Something you wanna *say, Dick?”* in a voice equally as dangerous and Bart stood up and yelled, “WALLY, ARE YOU DATING A BAT?” at the top of his lungs. In the ensuing barrage of questions in which the Speedsters were now involved in, Dick and Wally were forced to reveal to everyone that they had been dating for a year.

The room exploded into chaos.

Bruce glared pointedly at Tim and Jason, whom he knew very well had *both* already known that Wally and Dick were dating but had chosen not to inform Dick that they knew, telling Bruce that they wanted Dick to tell them in his own good time. It had been, Bruce now knew, folly to assume that they had good intentions, because clearly they had been biding their time for a moment just such as this.

Stephanie was yelling at Dick about stealing her thunder, Bart was yelling at Wally about breaking the bonds of brotherhood by keeping such a secret from him, Kon was yelling at Wally and Dick about the same thing, Dick was yelling back at Stephanie that he couldn’t have known and also he’d been forced into this, Damian was yelling at Dick about *trust* and *lies of omission* while Jon, next to him, sang to himself as he stabbed at his celery (which was his way of fully zoning out of the conversation, something that Bruce wished he knew how to do) and Tim and Jason were yelling at each other. When Bruce zeroed in on them to hear what they were upset about, he realized they were doing the thing they liked doing for purposes of causing more ruckus: that is, they were having a perfectly normal conversation at the top of their lungs because they found it funny.

Because the three of them had the same sense of humor, it was this that made Bruce chuckle to himself, just once, because if Dick had seen him laughing, Dick would have descended on him like an avenging angel.

Jason caught Bruce’s eye, then, and instead of scolding him, Bruce said, much louder than necessary given that Clark had perfect hearing no matter what the situation was, “Clark, if you’d pass the potatoes, please.”

Clark's whole face was very flat, which was how Bruce knew that he was working very hard at not laughing. Clark passed the potatoes. Lois hid her laughter in her wine glass, and then called down to Bruce asking how his roof was doing with all this snow. Bruce yelled back at her that it was doing fine, thanks, and how was her article on Congressman Walker's hiding of the deal with the oil company going, and she called back that it was great, she'd finally hit a breakthrough with her latest source, and could Tim pass the corn, and Tim yelled back as he passed the corn and asked if she'd made her raspberry gelato, and she yelled back that she had, and she was glad that he was looking forward to it, and Clark had his face hidden in a napkin, shaking with laughter, and Jason was laughing too, meeting Bruce's eyes so he knew that Jason was laughing with him, eyes bright and young, the way they were sometimes these days.

Tim looked over at him, too, and Bruce winked at both of them. Their grins were matching.

Then Alfred walked into the room, and shut the door with a definitive snap.

The room went deadly quiet instantly. Wally vanished and reappeared at Iris' right hand side, ducking his head low enough that he nearly disappeared behind a large pile of rolls.

"Alfred," said Bruce, low and carrying and amused, "you've done wonderfully and I think the food is all here. Wally will go get whatever else you need, won't you, Wally? Grand. Won't you sit with us, Alfred."

There was a chorus of agreement, and Alfred bowed a little, taking a seat at other end of the table, so it was Bruce and Alfred facing each other.

It was a delightful dinner, then, if not devoid of the glares Jason and Tim kept pretending to throw at Dick. Dick pretended not to see anything but his own plate, which was apparently so fascinating that he had to keep eyes on it at all times except for when he was darting looks at Bruce, who made a show of looking normal and unbothered so Dick would relax. The end of the evening heard another start to the chaos in the living room: Tim and Jason were having another go at Dick, while Damian had cornered Stephanie to perform what was probably going to be the funniest shovel talk ever had.

Bruce showed the Kents to the door. He glanced over his shoulder to

be sure nothing was getting too intense and found Jason with his arm slung casually over Tim's shoulder, both of them laughing as they ribbed at their older brother. It was a sight that was familiar nowadays, though a year ago, no one could have fathomed such a thing.

He turned back to the Kents. Lois and Clark were smiling at him.

"Oh, family," said Lois, laughingly tipping her head in the direction of his sons' ruckus.

Bruce just smiled at her. "Family," he agreed, and Clark's laughter rang into the night.

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